



THE TRAIL OF THE SQUID

THE TRAIL OF THE SQUID

BY

HARVEY WICKHAM

AUTHOR OF "THE CLUE OF THE PRIMROSE PETAL,"
"THE SCARLET X," "THE BONCOEUR AFFAIR," ETC.



NEW YORK
EDWARD J. CLODE

PZ 3
W633
T2

COPYRIGHT, 1924, BY
EDWARD J. CLODE

All Rights Reserved

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

FEB 12 '24

©C1A765984

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. PARIS PREPARES TO DANCE	9
II. MASKS AND MURDER	28
III. THE MISÉRICORDE	43
IV. THE EX-KING TAKES A HAND	58
V. WHAT THE POLICE NEVER SEE	75
VI. A WELL-RECOMMENDED SERVANT	96
VII. A MANSION AND ITS INMATES	114
VIII. SIDE LIGHTS	128
IX. MORE VANDALISM	149
X. THE FATE OF AN INFORMER	173
XI. AVIGNON	202
XII. AN ELOPEMENT	222
XIII. LEPADOU ENTERS THE TOWER	247
XIV. BAITING THE TRAP	273
XV. WITHIN THE TENTACLES	289
XVI. ALL JOURNEYS END	301

THE TRAIL OF THE SQUID

THE TRAIL OF THE SQUID

CHAPTER I

PARIS PREPARES TO DANCE

CLARA HOPE was in Paris with no other object than to find some trace of her employer, Ferris McClue. It was the evening of March 17, the festival of *mi-carême*, or mid-lent, and the ancient carousal known as the *bal des Tapettes* was being revived in at least a dozen different quarters after a half-century of neglect. All Paris, in other words, was preparing to dance and to make a night of it.

But Clara did not know this. She only knew that The Ferret, who had left her alone in charge of his New York office more than a year ago, no longer answered either letters or cablegrams or gave any other sign of continued existence. Beyond question something serious had happened. Yes, but what? That was the problem which she had set herself to solve.

Outwardly few women could have looked less fitted for the task. She was still to all appearance that plump little Puritan, just beginning to be a bit old-maidish in her ideas but not so far gone as to be altogether contented with the lot of school-teacher in a New England country town, who had answered his advertisement for a book-keeper at the beginning of their joint career.

In his office, giving herself conscientiously to the work, she had progressed wonderfully, learned in a short time all that could be taught of the technic of crime detection practiced on a modern and magnificent scale, and seen her whole existence fill with the crude material of excitement. Once or twice, face to face with violence and death, she had risen to heights of devotion only to be explained by love. Yet, although she had promised McClue that she would marry him, she had never been able to overcome a certain innate distaste for his profession. Her idea of marriage was that of a haven where one might be at peace and thoroughly conventional; and whenever there was an interval of calm at the agency she showed an unmistakable tendency to revert to the school-marm, having always failed utterly to find that delight in adventure for adventure's sake which had led The Ferret to much of his success.

Once, at the end of a perilous voyage to the South Seas, they were actually on the point of taking out a marriage license, when another taxi running into theirs had hurled her into temporary invalidism. Upon her recovery, she looked back upon the accident almost as an escape. Perhaps she was still suffering from shock. Certainly marriage no longer appealed to her. And when McClue, fired with the ambition to track a notorious criminal, expressed a desire to go to Europe, she rather exaggerated the vague weakness which continued to cling about her, and thus managed to get herself left behind.

It was after his departure, when the letters she dutifully wrote to the absentee suddenly ceased to bring responses, that a new Clara rose, so to speak, like a Phoenix from the ashes of the old. No mere estrangement confronted her, for McClue did not answer even business communications. Something inimical, subtle and daring had enveloped him, swallowed him up. And with the conviction of this fact came that flair, that eagerness in the pursuit of clues which formerly had been The Ferret's alone. She developed something like clairvoyance, and though she had nothing to go upon save his last report—to the effect that the man he sought had been all but in his hands

only to slip through them and disappear—she was troubled by no doubts as to the general course to be followed.

He had been about to start for Avignon, but no evidence existed that he had ever reached there. Better begin, then, in Paris, where he was known to have lived. The only other clue, if clue it could be called, was a passage in his last letter, wherein he had playfully described the enemy as “a human squid, with tentacles everywhere but whose head keeps out of the way.” Little enough, in all conscience. But she did not despair. She was in Paris, and somewhere about her lay the trail she sought.

Letting herself drift with the crowds, she crossed the Seine to the Latin Quarter and passed up the famous boulevard St. Michel to where from a simple wooden archway the name “Bouiller” in electric lights shone invitingly upon a knot of masks already seeking admittance.

“What is it?” she asked in bookish French of the men behind the ticket window.

“All night ball, Miss,” he grinned, shoving forward a bit of pasteboard.

By dint of following the line of least resistance, she had come to the very center of the night’s doings—a much-advertised entertainment that was being put on

by the united efforts of the painters, sculptors, writers and musicians of the neighborhood, and promising to rival in its extravagance one of those scandalous and now almost forgotten *fêtes des fous* of the Middle Ages.

In this same direction, had she but known it, two men almost completely enveloped in black dominoes were being driven in a rapid motor-car which an initiate would have recognized as belonging to the police. The elder of these, a gray-headed figure with twinkling eyes and a restless, squirrel-like activity in all his movements, looked out of place in an official vehicle. No casual observer would have dreamed that he was a magistrate, and indeed Tardieu's connection with the *Parquet* had often been criticized. Yet there was an air of whimsical honesty about the judge and a certain ease in bearing, indicative of ability so long unquestioned that it could afford to dispense with dignity.

"You should remember the two canons of Evreux," he was saying to his companion. "Both were hanged from the belfry of their cathedral for trying to suppress the follies of the carnival."

Victor Balai, a much younger man, shrugged his shoulders as high as was permitted by the respect due

to a *juge d'instruction* from one who was merely at the head of the *Police Giudiciare*.

"I suppose that's some eighteenth century precedent," he ventured.

"Seventeenth," corrected Tardieu. "But don't think I'm altogether out of touch with the things of the twentieth. I'd like to stop this ball tonight as much as you would. Some remedies, however, are worse than the disease. And just because *balai* means *broom* and you happen to be a new one, I wouldn't try to sweep everything clean if I were you—not, at least, until I was tired of being in office."

"Oh, I shan't *do* anything," snapped the chief. "Another outrage to public morals, more or less, counts for nothing these days."

"We're lucky, Balai, if we get off with that. Do you recall what is said to have happened at the festival of *Santa Maria della Salute* at Venice last fall? And at the public games at Cassis before that? It looks to me as if a new sort of *Jack l'Eventeur* had made his appearance in Europe."

The other turned in surprise.

"They were murders, you think?"

"I'm sure of it, official reports to the contrary notwithstanding."

"Even so, they've nothing to do with us."

"I hope not, Balai, I hope not. You're afraid of an orgy. I'm afraid of a crowd. But here we are. Heaven send that nothing happens to put us both in the right."

They drew their hoods hastily over their heads and faces, descended from the car, and with the careful steps of men unaccustomed to having their vision limited to what could be seen from eye-holes, made their way to the entrance of the Bouiller establishment. There they presented ordinary tickets and were admitted without their identities having been disclosed.

A little earlier that same evening, the coming ball was being discussed in an unnoticed corner of a promiscuous resort known as the Café de la Rotonde, at the junction of the boulevards Raspail and Montparnasse, by a pair of worthies of a different sort.

"You don't mean," said one—a slender youth, fastidiously dressed and with over-white hands, "you don't mean that you won't be there?"

The other wagged his heavy beard disdainfully, letting his long black hair trace yet another infinitesimal streak of grease upon the hunched-up folds of his velveteen coat.

"Not if my name continues to be Flamand Bec.

Scélérats! Poseurs! What should I do at their ball? You like that sort of thing, Haquenée. As for me, I'd prefer to see them all hanged—in place of their pictures at the next *salon*."

"You're a savage," smiled he of the pale hands, giving a squint at his elegant self in one of the mirrors which covered the walls. "Now I'm glad to mix with these people. Makes me feel as if I was coming up in the world."

"And they make me feel as if I had come down."

"Yes, that's what's the matter with you, *mon vieux*. But I've got an extra ticket. Stick it into your pocket and forget that the Academy is sour grapes."

"The Academy?"

Bec swore furiously beneath his breath, shoved the proffered entrance-slip away from him, thrust a hand deep into his trousers and brought out a crumpled bunch of hundred-franc notes.

"If you think it's poverty that keeps me away from those dancing apes, what do you say to this?"

Haquenée, or La Haquenée as he was more frequently called, regarded the unexpected sight of money with narrowing eyes.

"You've sold a picture—or I was never an apache!"

"That's likely," the other growled, tossing the notes

contemptuously to the floor—from which a passing waiter, thinking the motion accidental, hastened to restore them to his hand.

La Haquenée's eyes grew narrower still, and across his face swept a look—keen, cold, sinister.

"*Copain*," he whispered, "I always suspected that you were one of us. But what's the lay?"

Bec threw back his head and laughed.

"You're a *bien joli canaille*, aren't you, with your petty hates and scimmages? Here, take this stuff if you don't really care where such things come from. But before you call me comrade——"

"I'd better make sure you aren't the devil in person, eh?"

Haquenée refused the money and veiled his glance of speculative curiosity in an amiable looking grin. "I know how to interest you in the ball, though. La Gadelle will be there—and I've seen you watching her in the Bois."

"Why not? The most beautiful woman in Paris—anyone might watch her. But she has bought a villa at Nimes, and is going to marry Julien Ferrard and live like Maupassant's Corsican lovers—or those in 'Moonlight.' She'll no more be at *les Tapettes* than I will."

"There you're wrong. It's Ferrard's idea, I under-

stand. They're being given a dinner somewhere and are going afterwards."

"Bah! Do you know these people?"

"No more than you do. Only—a cat may look at a king."

"Then let me tell you something. Ferrard is lame, and he'll never paint anything. But he isn't such a fool as to lead the Red Currant back to *that* gang."

"*Oh-é! Rougette!*"

La Haquenée lifted his voice at the sight of a very young woman with a head of beautiful auburn hair rioting from beneath a cheap knitted cap, who was passing at the farther end of the *salle*.

She paused, nodded carelessly, then caught sight of Bec and pushed her way through the gay, chattering, cigarette-smoking crowd, which, unable to find enough tables, overflowed the aisles and gave to the place an atmosphere of animated suffocation.

"Flamand says that Silva Jonquille won't be at the ball. He has murdered a tourist, or something, and has francs to throw to the dogs. But he pretends he's going to spend the evening here."

"She'll surely be at the ball," responded Rougette, leaning towards long-beard and displaying a figure with that slender, cat-like grace seldom found even

in Paris except among the artists' models. "I'm going to her farewell dinner now. It's at l'Estrange's. And I'm starred in the pageant at the Bouiller afterwards. It's to be quite *shock-ing*, like before the war."

At her mincing pronunciation of the English word, sounding like a snake's hiss in the midst of her liquid, Latin Quarter prattle, Bec frowned. But he nodded at the same time.

"In that case, I'll go."

"*A bientôt, alors.*"

"How soon?"

"Midnight. Don't be late if you want to see the surprise."

"So, there are two red-heads in this affair," observed La Haquenée as the girl turned away. "Which one do you go to see? *Dame!* I believe this one would like to be your little cabbage."

"*Va t'en!*" mumbled Bec in his beard. "Get out of here before I put you out. But—leave me that ticket. I mightn't be able to get another."

And having thus parted with the *apache*, who showed not the least offense, he pocketed the erstwhile despised bit of paper and gave the whole of his outward attention to the ordering and consumption of a second *absinthe sucrée*.

On the left bank of the Seine, ten years is an eternity. So Silva Jonquille, whose gorgeous locks of *châtain clair* had won for her the name of La Gadelle, or Red Currant, had long since ceased to pass for anything less than pure Parisienne. She never talked about her beginnings, but it was generally understood that she had risen from the depths. Some even pretended that she had been found in a Paris gutter, a half-naked child whom a wandering beggar picked up to collect sous while he posed as her father and played the guitar. Others thought to identify her as a figurante snatched from some boîte of a theater on Montmartre and launched in society to please the whim of a protector, who, out of pure caprice, preferred to remain in the background.

It was true—part of it—in spirit if not in detail. Silva had certainly experienced vicissitudes. She had been hungry, and knew what it was to be in danger of arrest for stealing bread. Filled with the will to live, she had climbed by whatever rungs fate offered, seizing upon anything, rejecting nothing—unless, perhaps, the most obvious thing of all. The hidden protector was a myth.

In fact, for several years now she had owed her position, her toilets, her salon and her private motor-car to her own extraordinary skill in reproducing the

patterns of famous Gobelin tapestries. In the back of her luxurious apartment was a big, unfurnished room where she worked every morning. But she hid it like a guilty secret, chosing to pose before the world as a butterfly.

It was a world peculiar to Paris, gay, elegant, and a sham. People having a vogue rather than a reputation made the bulk of it. There were always new faces there, taking the places of those that had disappeared and making a circle whose apparent stability was due, like the rainbows, to the momentary splendor of myriads of rapidly falling particles. In such a milieu no real acquaintances are made—which is the reason, possibly, why it was never guessed that she, its undisputed queen, outwardly more madly frivolous than the rest, was American by birth, half American by blood, the daughter of a comfortable and eminently respectable home on the outskirts of Salem, Massachusetts.

Julien Ferrard, her fiancé, gave as little promise of stability as the others. Clever—that was the word usually used to describe him—a man of talent whose industry and staying-powers were yet to be proven.

I'Estrange, on the contrary, was a personage. Some of the noblest families in Provence recognized him as

a kinsman, and he had already achieved a conspicuous position among the artists of his time. This double advantage enabled him to mingle the upper and lower halves of society with a lordly and generous carelessness. Dipping into Silva's circle as into many others, always taking the best, his mansion in the old faubourg St. Germain excluded nobody who could boast personal superiority of any sort, and the *invités* to La Gadelle's farewell dinner included not only Rougette, the model, but the Duchess de Fayves and the Countess de Montfayat. And the countess was actually present—a marvel of French republicanism at which the Anglo-Saxon can only gasp.

It was a distinct promotion for La Gadelle, for notwithstanding l'Estrange's contempt for conventions, his approval was like an accolade and gave a certain character of authenticity to any reputation upon which it fell. She might have been expected to show some sense of satisfaction. On the contrary, it was noticed all during the dinner that she seemed in less than her usual spirits. Was it coming home to her, now when it was too late, that Julien was an encumbrance, and that she was preparing to turn her back upon Paris just when new doors were opening before her? Questions which were certainly asked, but not answered. And at the earliest possible moment she gave the other

guests an additional subject for conversation by quietly disappearing from their midst.

In front of the mansion was a paved courtyard with a fountain, a number of century-old trees and a great wall rising to shut off any vulgar curiosity which might exist in the street. Here her host found her seated upon a moss-grown bench and gazing absently at the mass of vines which hung over the house-front like a theater curtain.

"Meditating mischief!" he laughed, seating himself beside her. "We're going to be treated to one of the Red Currant's famous pranks."

"Jacques," she broke out impulsively, "don't let's pretend. It hurts—this send-off tonight—and you know it."

"Why, I thought——"

"You thought it would hurt less than the one I was likely to have if you didn't interfere. And you're right. But I don't belong here. I was never a naked *gamin* dancing in the streets, but I've been worse things. Rich foreigners, gamblers, younger sons without morals or real brains—they are my sort of people."

"On the contrary," he contradicted, in his most incisive French, "they are merely the people you persist in going with."

"I have my reasons. It doesn't matter how I behave among them, and they help me to get dizzy."

"Is that what you are after?"

"It's what I've got to have."

"And yet you're planning for a nest in the country. Paul Fort, I understand, is already writing a pastoral about you, with Julien——"

"It's on Julien's account that I'm going. But what if he doesn't like it, Jacques? He insists on our winding up tonight with the *bal des Tapettes*. That's what worries me."

"I knew there was something. But why?"

"Because I love him, if you want to know. I want him—his weakness, his strength, everything—just for myself. At the ball he'll drink absinthe, and make me jealous. I've been ruining him."

She rose, stretching her arms out towards the trees through which the moonlight was just beginning to sift.

"I want him in a place like this," she added softly. "I've never had anything to care for all my life—except a parrot, once, when I was a little girl."

"A parrot?"

"Yes. And I lost that."

L'Estrange regarded her attentively, but whether in simple enjoyment of the picture she made, or in an

attempt to read the depths of her soul it would have been difficult to say. Certainly the picture was excuse enough. Her gown, of a tawny shade in the daytime, showed pure white in the moonlight, giving her the look of a statue. Her features, however, were far too expressive for marble—the dark brown eyes especially, with a disturbing yellow glint visible in them even now. There was something of the same tigerish quality about her hair, hanging loosely caught in carefully calculated negligée about her shoulders—that too abundant hair of *châtain clair*.

“Sometimes I feel as if I were two persons,” she said, abruptly returning to her place. “Julien—he should be careful of me. I don’t understand the feelings that come to me sometimes. I must certainly bury myself in the country. It’s the only salvation for either of us. Love is what I’ve needed. And if love fails me——”

“Stop it!” protested l’Estrange in the tone of a physician addressing a hysterical patient.

But he was arrested by a stream of light coming through an opened door.

“Silva! You little cat, where are you?” called a voice, as a young man, limping slightly yet showing abundant vigor in all his movements, came down the house steps into the yard.

It was Julien Ferrard, dressed in conventional evening clothes save for a soft felt hat that was perched jauntily on one side of his head.

"Oh, there you are!" he went on, catching sight of her. "I've a surprise. Rougette has asked me to take part with her in the *grande entrée* at the Bouiller. I'm to be—but that's the surprise.

"Hello, l'Estrange. I was looking for you, too. Will you please see that Silva gets there in time? Say a little after eleven-thirty. I must run right off and dress."

Silva got up and took hold of the lapels of her lover's coat, as if to adjust them but in reality to look into his eyes. He was laboring under considerable excitement, there could be no doubt of that.

"What a boy!" she exclaimed when he had gone. "See how stirred up he is at the prospect of being in a tableau."

"Yes, a tableau with Rougette Picot, one of my—one of everybody's models."

"There, I knew it! You don't like Julien."

"Do *you*?" The painter turned suddenly to face her. "Do you really think he is worth all this?"

"Ah, you don't mean that, you can't! But you see I had reason when I said that I dreaded the ball."

What would she have said could she have known what was to happen there? What did she say? That was a question which came to engage all Paris for many and many a day.

CHAPTER II

MASKS AND MURDER

A HALL, prodigiously long and wide in proportion to its height, with a gallery running along beneath the eaves of a peaked, open-timbered roof—these are the ordinary features of the interior of the Bouiller dancing-establishment. But on the night of the *bal des Tapettes*, a cone-shaped pavilion of stalls, or boxes, rose in the center of the floor space. Boxes on a slightly raised platform also bordered the walls; and behind them, masked by gorgeous curtains, numerous narrow and complicated passages led to refreshment-rooms, booths, privacy and all the accommodations necessary for the housing of a combined Saturnalia and fair.

What first struck the eye was the profusion of banners, wreaths and colored paper lanterns, the banks of massed spectators and the whirling mob of capriciously costumed merry-makers, which, at eleven o'clock, already had possession of the floor. Electric globes—here white, there green or red, added to the

general sense of dazzling confusion and made it difficult for the mind to grasp any details.

From behind artificial palms at either end of the ball, jazz bands were playing—one a tango and the other an old-fashioned hesitation waltz. The warring strains met and mingled in the neighborhood of the pavilion, where they were half drowned by laughter and the babble of voices. The time of the *grande entrée* of the official hosts of the evening not having yet arrived, the world in general and its nether hemisphere in particular were making the most of the interval.

"I think it's simply great!" said a voice, speaking English in a clear, girlish tone that cut through the surrounding French patois and Parisian argot like the notes of a flute.

She was one of a group of three standing in front of a pavilion-box not two feet from where Tardieu and his companion had temporarily halted.

"Don't let's settle down yet," she went on. "I want to dance."

"It isn't as bad as I expected," admitted a capable-looking woman, who held the girl's arm within her own. "And since your father *would* let you come, I fervently hope it won't get any worse. But who in the world would you dance with?"

"Here is papa," said the girl tentatively.

A ruddy-faced party with a bald head, a tuft of whiskers protruding from his chin, turned towards the speaker.

"Gad, I'd like to, Millie! But you know I never learned anything but the Scottish hornpipe and the Virginia reel, and I wouldn't dare tackle either one of them things here."

"Eben!" exclaimed the woman. "Is it possible that you're learnin' to swear?"

Eben winked at his daughter.

"When you're in Rome do as the Romans do, ma. And I was only tryin' to get to understand these animals before you wade in and reform 'em."

"This is the sort of thing I object to," muttered the chief of police in the judge's ear. "You see this family? Americans, of course. We Parisians will simply corrupt them and send them home without ideals. The daughter's head is turned already."

But Tardieu had stepped forward and, was addressing the mother in such English as he could recall from his student days.

"Pardon me, *madame*. *Mais*—did I hear your daughter say she wanted a partner? I am not exactly of the official committee——"

"Then what are you speakin' to us for?"

The challenge was so abrupt that Tardieu's Anglo-Saxon speech deserted him. But he had the presence of mind to reach into a pocket and produce his card.

"A judge of something—or is it school-teacher?" she read out. "It says 'instruction.' "

"*Madame*, not so loud if you please. I am an examining magistrate, and my duty compels me to be here in a private character. But if your daughter seeks to be able to say that she danced at this ball, without doubt she will find herself more willing to go home if——"

"Do let me, ma—just one turn. It will make the girls green with envy when they hear of it."

And without waiting for a response, the speaker extended her arms and permitted herself to be borne away into the rhythmic swirl of the hesitation, though there was more swirl than rhythm about it until they had made their way a considerable distance towards one of the bands.

"Are you really a judge?" she asked, her attention released by the growing distinctness of the tune. "Or was that what you call—*blague* is the word, isn't it?"

"I really am, *sans blague*."

"Then I don't suppose you came exactly for the purpose of rescuing young ladies from their parents?"

"No; I had a whim to scandalize one of my colleagues."

"Oh!"

She laughed, but still with a pleasant, silvery quality of tone. And when Tardieu asked for her name, she replied expansively:

"Millie Granger, from Salem, Mass., U. S. A. And that's my father and mother, naturally, that I'm with. At home I go alone everywhere, but Paris is supposed to be wicked—though I can't see anything wicked about it."

"I hope you never will," Tardieu interjected. "Your people are right, however. This isn't the place for you, and I'm going to try to frighten them into taking you home."

"Not before the *grande entrée*."

"Immediately after, then. There are a lot of roughs behind these masks."

Tardieu, in fact, was waking up to the consciousness of having committed an indiscretion, and that to continue dancing would be sheer foolishness. Twice already he had heard himself called judge—once by Millie Granger and once by her mother. It was time to get rid of this partner, whose simple dress and untarnished young face made her so conspicuous.

Nor was the judge's uneasiness without foundation. A public *bal masqué* is one vast ambush of unobserved eyes and of unnoticed ears, especially in Paris where is still the Latin habit of being always on the lookout for bits of information likely to be useful in the endless intrigues which lie behind nearly every event. At the very moment when he was presenting his card to Mrs. Granger, a group of clowns with grotesquely comic faces had been passing at his elbow, and one of them had caught at least a part of the mother's exclamation.

"Did you get that, Vol-au-Vent?"

"Get what?"

"The stiff looking *type* in a black domino—the old one called him judge."

"Let her. I was looking at the little one. *Qu'elle a des beaux yeux*—and just out of the nursery. If she's staying, I think I'll try my luck—eh, Haquenée?"

"Then I wouldn't begin by calling names," said the clown thus addressed. "If he's a judge, though, I can guess the rest."

"Who do you think it was, then?"

"Him?" Haquenée paused until his companions had gathered close around, then uttered the word just above a whisper:

"*Tardieu!* What other judge in Paris is human

enough? Useful thing to know. Suppose, now, we just scatter and keep our mouths shut?"

The fun waxed over more fast and furious, but still preserved a certain decency and restraint. Grotesque creatures of all shapes and sizes pranced about—stilt-legged giraffes, harmless elephants composed of straw and bed-ticking, now and then a dragon belching Greek fire yet having at its heart nothing more serious than a party of young men, their legs imperfectly hidden by draperies.

After a clown had come and beat her over the head with a toy balloon, Millie Granger was quite ready to enter the box where her parents had seated themselves. But she treated Tardieu to a little *moue* of defiance as he launched a parting warning.

"Thought I'd just tell that young thing she ought to be at home," he said, rejoining Balai in the shelter of a bunch of floral decorations at the base of a pillar.

"No doubt you convinced her," came the ironical reply.

But the absence of malice in the chief's tone showed that the intoxication of all this hilarious noise—this interplay of color, this incessant contest between two dance tunes, and the nearness of so much beauty, genuine and otherwise—was beginning to tell even upon his prosaic disposition.

"What now?" he added. "It's getting quiet."

"Yes, the bands are retiring to come in with the parade. I wish that girl *would* go home. Have you noticed how many clowns there are about? Some of them look familiar, and I shouldn't wonder——"

Tardieu broke off, for the silence had become absolute as the united bands began the great circuit of the hall. They were marching with an exaggerated lifting of the feet, evidently a take-off on the German goose-step, but the feet had been provided with felt slippers and made no noise. The horn-blowers puffed their cheeks, the clarinet players worked rapidly with the keys of their instruments, and the drummers seemed to be pounding with all their strength—in vain. None of the blows took effect, not a note came from any of the horns. Energetic, red-faced, with evidence of hard musical labor in every gesture, the band emitted not a sound.

For a moment the spectators watched in astonished surprise. Then the absurdity of the pantomime went home and the very rafters shook with the echoes of side-splitting, childish laughter.

It was soon quiet again, after the band there followed—at first nothing at all. A long strip of bare dancing-floor upon which nobody ventured to intrude

lay as if it had been a ribbon which the musicians had unrolled in their wake. Then from the far end of the hall an unorganized troupe of men, women and children, of all ages and in various stages of raggedness, frumpiness, or gaudy poverty wandered nonchalantly forward.

It was a spectacle worth seeing—the professional models of Paris in their ordinary street clothes, chattering with each other, puffing cigarettes, nibbling at *brioche*s and carelessly emptying bottles of beer down their throats. Pathetic, too, it soon was felt. For here was the miserable raw material out of which most of the art of the present was being made.

But as soon as the round was complete, this same rabble began to reappear, all splendid in fine feathers. They were now in groups posed upon floats propelled slowly forwards by invisible means—groups that counterfeited pictures and statuary by famous masters, beginning with the primitives and running down through the various schools.

The first, caricaturing a religious subject, had its mockery so subtly hidden that many looked upon it as a work of serious beauty. But with each epoch the burlesque grew stronger, until it became frankly comic. Just as surely the comic passed into the grotesque. What was art coming to? And to make the prospect

more uncertain, the illumination was growing more and more dim.

It seemed like an illusion at first. But the lowering of the lights was a fact. Scarcely seen, the monsters looked more monstrous than ever, and finally only their vague outlines were visible, allowing the imagination full liberty to turn them into nightmares.

Then came darkness, complete and awful, prolonging itself until everyone expected the next instant to be punctuated by some disturbance. Yet nobody moved or said a word. It was so still that the place seemed to have emptied itself—as though the ball were only an evil dream, and the dreamer, hypnotized, had passed abruptly into a deeper and dreamless sleep.

Evidently the managers of this frolic were the saddest sort of wags, and capable psychologists to boot. For just as the silence had stretched itself to the breaking point, the lights blazed up, no longer tinted but blindingly white.

Yells, groans, hisses and bravos broke from the spectators, compelled to shade their eyes and to discover only after a momentary fit of blindness exactly what new surprise had been arranged.

It was a surprise calculated to make old-timers recall the Latin Quarter license of pre-war days. The

monsters had drawn themselves up to protect the ribbon of empty floor. And between these double lines, no longer upon the floats—which had disappeared—but with their naked feet upon the boards, stood all the beautiful models of Paris posing exactly as they posed every day in the privileged privacy of its studios.

This was but a frame. The semblance of an enormous turtle came crawling down the center of the ribbon. Upon its back was a playing fountain, copied from one of the famous fountains at Versailles, with a white horse prancing at each of its corners.

Nobody paid any attention to the fountain, however. The shouts which broke out as it passed were for the women rising from the water of its basin, caught in the tentacles of a huge devil-fish, or squid.

It was Rougette Picot, as motionless as if turned to stone, a look of frozen agony upon her face, her hair draped in all its metallic luster about her nude, white shoulders

Everybody recognized the composition. It was one which had been exhibited by l'Estrange at the last *salon*, where it had made a sensation. But that was nothing to the sensation created by its model now.

Upon two people, however, "The Struggle of Inno-

cence," as it was called, produced a different effect.

One of these was a stout, bearded man, wearing no disguise and therefore clearly recognizable by any who might chance to know such a poor devil as he apparently was—the very Flamand Bec who had been moodily courting the "green muse" at La Rotonde an hour or so before. Seemingly he had taken more alcohol than was good for him, for at the sight of the fountain and its human center-piece, he began to mutter such oaths and imprecations that those in his neighborhood hastened to shut him up.

The other malcontent was Silva Jonquille, in one of the pavilion-boxes with l'Estrange.

"I don't wonder it displeases you," said the painter, bending from a chair immediately behind her as she shrugged her shoulders.

"The picture? It is beautiful. I've often told you so. I—I was thinking of something else."

This was true enough. She was thinking of the man who must be concealed behind the inflated rubber hideousness of the devil-fish. Poor Julien! Was he really infatuated with that brazen woman, that cheap-counterfeit—albeit a youthful one—of herself? If the scene they were representing should be turned into allegory, it might be the female who was supplied

with tentacles. Anyway, he was going away from Paris now—if only it wasn't too late.

"I detest this sort of thing," continued l'Estrange. "And as for the painting, they have completely inverted the spirit of it."

"Look!" interrupted Silva. "They are going to dance."

"Yes, and the lights are being dimmed again."

Both remarks were justified. The lights were undoubtedly lowering, and Rougette, released from the clinging tentacles, had bounded lightly from the fountain to begin the steps of *le Passetto*—a new *valse espagnole*, the tune of which was streaming unctuously from the united bands.

The Squid started to scramble after her, but only landed on one of the horses; and then seeming to lose his balance altogether, went from the back of the terrified animal to the boards with a realistic sprawl.

Rewarded by a round of applause, he slowly assumed a human posture, took several steps—awkward ones and marked by an exaggerated limp—and threw his eight arms about the expectant model. This was the signal for the other masqueraders—those, at least, who had the patience to wait. What ensued was a kaleidoscopic mingling of beauty and monstrosity,

every couple swaying to the beat of one of the most voluptuous melodies ever composed.

And now came an unprogrammed incident—a second extinguishing of the already waning lights. Cries of impatience rose from the crowd, half of whom were preparing to go home, and a single shriek cutting like a knife through the duller grumbling passed with most as an outburst of hysteria. Tardieu and his companion, the chief, knew better as, without a word, they began to fight their way forwards.

When they reached her, Rougette was lying prostrate upon the floor where she had been dancing, and a final spasmodic movement of her muscles, urging her body over the smooth, wax surface, uncovered a red stain. This much was visible in the light of matches which were now being struck all over the hall. But so quickly did the two officials succeed in having the girl removed to an anteroom that not more than a score of persons noticed anything wrong, and many of these left the ball with the idea that the belle of the fountain had merely fainted from the fatigue of her pose.

She had not fainted, Rougette was dead, struck by some weapon no longer in evidence.

And where was Julien Ferrard, who had openly announced his intention of joining her when he left

l'Estrange's? He was not to be seen, nor was there any such creature as a devil fish among the grotesques now moving gayly beneath the quickly restored lights to a repetition of *le Passetto*.

CHAPTER III

THE MISERICORDE

IN FRANCE, a *juge d'instruction* is without jurisdiction until formally assigned to a case. But Tardieu, refusing to be bound by red tape, had his preliminary investigation in full swing long before his authority arrived.

There was an incredible audacity about the crime which instinct warned him was but the bait for some trap into which he and the chief were expected to fall. Appearances had been craftily planned, therefore were to be distrusted. But in order even to distrust them it was necessary first of all to find out what they were. So a *médecin légiste* (official physician) was sent for to probe the wound, and the taking of evidence began.

A good many citizens soon made the discovery that, no matter how apparently care-free the occasion, plain-clothes-men—*inspecteurs de la Sûreté* as they used to be called—are always present, ready to take a hand. A tap on the shoulder, a whisper in the ear, a momen-

tary display of a badge hidden beneath some frivolous costume was usually sufficient, and the person wanted would find himself discreetly conducted from the ball-room by a narrow corridor as cheerless as the Bridge of Sighs.

The court-room was a cubicle fitted up for the sale of confetti and serpentine, heaps of which now lay on the floor. And the two magistrates—seated in what was to have been the sales-girl's booth—might have passed for members of the Venetian Counsel of Ten, so incongruous was Justice in a domino in such a place, even though the domino hood had been pushed back hastily from the face. Behind a cloth partition at their back lay the body. Through a curtain in front came the sounds of the fête, which was progressing as if nothing had happened. And it was from witnesses still dazed by being plucked suddenly from the midst of merry-making that they learned the following curious details:

Rouquette, just before everything went dark, had paused in her dance and said something to The Squid which he appeared not to catch, and he had bent towards her—only to receive a box on the ear. A playful box, "*un coup de poing badin*," as one witness expressed it.

Whereupon he had caught her to him and kissed her, she resisting, some said. Others would have it that her resistance was a feint, a coquettish turning aside of her head after her arms were already about his neck.

With the failure of the lights she was heard to laugh, and to cry out, "*Le pari!*" that is to say "The bet!" though some were not quite certain of the word. It was agreed, however, that she had then leaped back with a shrill scream and gone staggering to her knees and finally to the floor, clutching at her breast. A man in the vicinity lighting a match for a cigarette—and not to see what had happened, he declared—had made this much of the action clear.

But to the continually repeated question: "Did you see him strike her?—was there a weapon in his hand?" the answer invariably came:

"Non, m'sieu le juge, rien."

Rien—absolutely nothing. Here was a vacancy in the evidence which could not be filled.

Equally remarkable was the continued absence of The Squid masquerader. The inspectors of the police had started on the trail without waiting for orders, but all they could discover was a few witnesses who had or thought they had seen him fleeing from the ball-room. The testimony in this connection was bizarre,

and to the effect that he had pushed his way through the dancers like one out of his wits—*seeming to shrink as he went*.

Quite a number swore to this circumstance, though those who had observed the latter part of his flight just before all trace of him was lost, were not positive that it was really The Squid, one even saying that it was "more like a mermaid."

"Then it might have been some frightened woman?" snapped Balai.

"It might have been anything, *m'sieu le chef*. One could not see much with only a few lighted matches to help. But I know how it made me feel."

"How do you mean?"

"It gave me goose-flesh."

"Superstitious nonsense!"

Balai turned towards one of his subordinates, who had entered holding a small object carefully wrapped in his handkerchief. Tardieu was in consultation with the *médecin légiste*.

"The doctor says it looks like a very narrow knife wound, probably extending through the left ventricle," he announced as the physician retired. "There's something that puzzles him, I should judge, and he's going deeper. But what have you there?"

"The knife that did it."

Balai indicated a tiny, red-stained blade which now lay on the table-like counter of the booth.

"It was on the floor where she fell," volunteered the *inspecteur*.

"Then why didn't you find it sooner?"

"Because, *m'sieu le juge*, it was hidden in the sawdust which the management has thrown over the spot to hide the——"

"We understand," the chief cut in. "All say she clutched at something. It must have been this. She drew it from the wound with her own hands, and dropped it. Everything is going splendidly."

"Like the rapids above a waterfall," agreed Tardieu, who feared above all things to fall upon some obvious but deceptive trail, along which the stubborn, practical nature of the chief would be certain to try to force the inquiry.

"In the first place," he went on, as the *inspecteur* saluted and went out, "we've got a dozen different descriptions of The Squid, if any of them are his."

"That won't matter, Judge, when we've found out who was seen to get into the costume."

"Hm! Do you fancy he had witnesses?"

"Somebody must have seen him. And here's the knife."

"Yes, a knife which she clutched and drew out, you say. But there's nothing to clutch it by. It has no handle."

"It has had one. Here are traces of sealing-wax. The handle has come off, that's all."

"Then where is it?"

"I'll find it," promised Balai.

"Probably you will," admitted the judge, taking out a pocket magnifier. "But your sealing-wax out to be lead, especially since—yes, I thought so. This thing's a *miséricorde*."

"A what?"

"'Poignard of pity,' some call it—a dagger formerly used to give the *coup de grace* to a wounded knight, and made so as to slip between two plates of armor—or to pry them apart if necessary. Here's the whole operation beautifully engraved."

Balai took the proffered lens and bent over what he had passed at first as a mere patch of delicate scratches.

"Better and better!" he chuckled. "This is almost as good as a fingerprint. There can't be two such knives in the world."

"That's just the trouble. A *miséricorde*, the very essence of which is substantial construction, patched together with sealing-wax. A *miséricorde* ought to

tape like a needle—this one, you'll observe, has a double point. Now what could possess a murderer to go out of his way to make things so easy for us?"

"A question which I am willing to leave to you—and to the court of assizes before which you will soon be holding him to appear," said Balai, rising. "I think I'll go have a talk with the medical expert."

Tardieu sighed. He knew he could look for no sympathy in the midst of perplexities of the sort that were beginning to assail him—that his energetic colleague would take special delight in collecting a mass of evidence against which nothing could be alleged but its psychological impossibility. And here was another figure—a clown's—sticking its head between the shoulders of the guards at the doorway.

"Can I come in, *m'sieu le juge* Tardieu?"

"But I fancy you've already been ordered to."

"You wrong me," complained the intruder, laying aside his false face of papier-mâché as he advanced. "If one of your flics was after me I didn't know it."

"Then why are you here, Haquenée? As an apache you're not in the habit of paying social calls on the judiciary, I suppose?"

"Since you know me, Judge, you ought to know that I've given up all that."

"Once an apache always an apache."

"*Par exemple!* You wouldn't say so if I was in trouble. But some says there's been a knife found."

"Ah, ha! *Le chantage*—a chance to bleed some friend through the nose."

"Would I dare, Your Honor, under *your* nose? But I've always paid attention to knives, and if you was to give me a look at it——"

"Tut, tut! Your eyes haven't been off it since you came in. Is there anything you want to say?"

"Not if it's that little toad-sticker there in front of you, I hadn't noticed it before, Judge, honest I hadn't."

"But now that you have?"

"*Par exemple!* I wouldn't like to talk about it. Never belonged to anybody in my set."

Tardieu bit his lip, vexed to find himself more in sympathy with this *farceur*, obviously startled out of his sangfroid by the sight of such an unusual weapon, than with the vigorous routine methods of the chief of police.

But his reflections were interrupted by the arrival of a very pretty young lady, a bald-headed man and a stout woman of an aggressive respectability. The young lady was smiling, the man merely sputtering; but the elder woman would probably have succeeded in not arriving at all had not an officer made bold to propel her forcibly whenever her demonstrations with

the terrible ferrule of the umbrella with which she was armed gave him a chance.

"Take me to Judge Tardieu," she kept demanding. "I didn't much like the ways of him when we met, but he'd never let us be treated like this."

"Mrs. Granger! A thousand pardons. Let go of her, you men. This is a most——"

"Why, ma, it *is* Judge Tardieu! I told you it was just some joke."

"A most unfortunate mistake," persisted his honor. "For the life of me I don't see how it happened."

"She was in a box opposite the murder," began one of her captors defensively, in French. "We couldn't understand her lingo, and——"

"Yes, yes. It's all right. But leave me to deal with her."

"What does it mean?" Mrs. Granger broke in, again getting her breath. "Can't an honest woman attend one of your indecent balls with her husband and daughter and not have a lot of roughs hustle her about?"

"They were policemen, *madame*."

"I told you so!" cried Granger importantly. "I suppose somebody has lost a pocketbook, and just because we're foreigners we're suspected——"

"You're suspected of nothing. But one of the entertainers——"

"Humph!" Mrs. Granger sniffed. "That brazen hussy dancin' with the fish was taken sick—I heard some English people say so. But I don't see——"

"She is dead," Tardieu corrected. "That's my excuse for bringing in everybody who might have noticed how it happened."

Another group was entering, but the judge, failing to perceive this, continued:

"You'd better take your daughter home at once. And all of you kindly accept my apologies."

"Dead!" said Mrs. Granger in a new voice. "There's something funny about this. You wouldn't bring folks here just to see how she was taken sick."

"Quite right. The girl was stabbed."

There was the rustle of a skirt as a woman among the new-comers slid suddenly to the floor. Ma Granger became at once a bustling bundle of solicitude.

"The poor dear!" she exclaimed, kneeling down by the prostrate figure. "She must understand English, and you've frightened her by your talk. Get me some water, some of you. Don't stand there and—why, I know her! Millie, come here. It's that girl I saw in the other box."

"You know her, *madame*?" asked the chief, who had

returned unperceived. "That is interesting, for I happen to know her myself."

"Who doesn't know Miss Jonquille?" retorted Tardieu. "Here's another blunder—unless she came voluntarily."

"Miss Jonquille?" repeated Mrs. Granger. "This is Silva Marx. She grew up in my own town, and many's the time I've wondered what became of her after she ran away to Europe. Look here under her hair. That's the scar she got from her brother throwin' a sharp stone at her when she was a baby—don't you remember, Eben?"

"It does look like the Marx girl. But it's been so long now that I can't be sure."

"Well, *I* can. And she's comin' to. Judge, this dress looks as if she must live in the country. If she hasn't any place near to go to——"

"She has plenty of places," it was Balai who interrupted. "A Breton peasant costume doesn't signify—at a masquerade. But the *juge d'instruction* would like your own address."

Tardieu frowned. Was there anything save a desire to be annoying behind this open reminder of his duty? Was it a hint that an attempt to protect anyone whatever from the poisonous breath of a police investigation would be met with resistance? There was no tell-

ing. He knew and liked La Gadelle, but it was easy to see that his friendship, if openly expressed, was apt to prove dangerous. And here was the entrance curtain lifting again to admit another acquaintance—l'Estrange.

The judge, a passionate art connoisseur, esteemed painters more than he did lawyers or even women. Indeed, he had been heard on more than one occasion to say that a single canvas by l'Estrange was worth the whole Code Napoleon. Was this infernal investigation going to be a holocaust of the privacy of all his friends?

But for once Balai too was impressed—not by the artist, it is true, but by the nobleman—and leaving the Bench stepped forward to inquire politely:

“Is there any way we can serve you, *m'sieu?*”

“I am looking for Miss Jonquille,” l'Estrange returned. “We were walking together through the crowd just now when we got separated and——”

“She is here,” interrupted Tardieu, pointing.

“What! She is ill?”

“A trifling indisposition. Would you be good enough to see that she gets home?”

“I shall take her in my carriage at once.”

And stooping down, the painter lifted the slowly re-

covering woman in his arms and bore her tenderly away.

"And now what?" asked the judge, when the room had finally been cleared.

Balai, who was examining a heap of tangled material which had been thrown on the table before him, slowly raised his head.

"Something important at last. Here's The Squid costume. An *inspecteur* just brought it in. What do you think of it?"

"Thin rubber," muttered Tardieu, bending over the rubbish.

"Yes, you know they told us he shrank as he ran. The tentacles must have broken in the press and deflated almost to nothing."

"I suppose so. And there's little else to it but a steel frame to keep certain parts in shape. Very simple and ingenious. But it doesn't look as if it were all here."

"It isn't. This was found caught on a nail—that's why he abandoned it. But here comes the *médecin légiste*."

The physician, in fact, had completed his preliminary labors and was carrying before him a sheet of paper upon which lay a small double-triangle of solid steel.

"*Voilà!*" he gloated. "This is what I found on probing the wound."

Balai, now in the best of humors, rubbed his hands.

"You see, Judge, even the double point to the *miséricorde* is explained. Our man must have stabbed her just before anybody struck a match—consequently no one observed him. And the knife broke off in the wound."

"It isn't broken off," ventured the physician, comparing the bit with the rest of the poignard. "It's been made to fit. Looks to me as if the blade had once been badly nicked and then mended instead of being ground down."

"Broken or loosened, it makes no difference. Are you ready, Judge, to have the body removed?"

Tardieu signified assent, and sat on for a long while after the others had gone, listening to the sounds of the ball roaring to ever greater heights of festivity beyond his retreat. For the first time in his life he felt the growing weight of his years. The careless, good-natured cynicism which had endeared him to another generation of Parisians was out of harmony with the unimaginative, business-like ways of the present. There was in many quarters a deepening conviction that he was a dreamer, and suddenly it came over him that rumor was right.

Balai already had a complete working theory of the crime. The Picot woman had been stabbed by a masquerader carrying a fancy dagger. It only remained now to trace the ownership of the blade and to arrest the man who had been seen to put on that particular mask. But none of this evidence impressed the judge's sense of reality. He felt that he was but groping over the deceptive surface of things. Why? Obviously because his sense of reality was a wayward faculty, of which he could give no logical account.

"At the same time," he mused, half aloud, "a knife with a loose handle is odd, and one with a loose point *and* a loose handle is preposterous. Balai may go ahead and clear up the whole matter to everybody's satisfaction, but he'll be wrong. The deuce of it is, I'll have to acquiesce—*unless I can dig some facts up of my own.*"

CHAPTER IV

THE EX-KING TAKES A HAND

SILVA revived slowly, but was able to walk without assistance by the time l'Estrange's car stopped in front of her residence—an apartment in one of the new studio buildings on the boulevard Raspail whose heavily respectable façades seem to belong to Vienna rather than to Paris.

"Don't bother to come up," she protested, when her escort stood beside her at the vestibule. "I'll be all right now."

"Of course you will," he assented. "A shock—it's nothing serious."

"You don't know what has happened, Jacques."

"Yes, I do. The police are very discreet, but I have eyes and ears."

"Then why do you say it's not serious? You know what he said in the garden."

"Ferrard? He said he was going to be in a tableau with Rougette."

"And now this has happened." Silva began to

tremble as her mind started once more over the route which it had been following ever since overhearing those dreadful words of the magistrate, "the girl was stabbed."

L'Estrange patted her hand.

"We don't know how it happened, Silva. Nobody has connected his name with it yet. Perhaps he didn't say to anybody else what he said to us. And the secret is safe with me."

"No, no, it can't be a secret. He'll have been seen in the dressing-rooms. The truth is bound to come out."

"We don't know that we want to keep it from coming out. Let's discover first what the truth is."

"What do you mean?"

Silva paused in the act of putting a key into the night-catch, and—swaying a little—permitted herself to be assisted to a seat on the steps. Before her lay the boulevard, broad, well-kept and empty.

"What are you hinting at?" she repeated, a wild note in her voice.

"Simply that we're not certain of anything yet—not even that Ferrard was at the ball. He expressed an intention to be there, but a thousand things might have prevented him from going."

"I never thought of that! Of course he wasn't

there. It was somebody else who went in his place. Julien wouldn't hurt a fly. But if we only had some evidence."

"You've just given some. As you say, he wouldn't hurt a fly. If it had been Julien behind that mask, nothing would have happened."

"Yet what could have kept him from the ball?"

"A thousand things—a quarrel with Rougette for instance."

"Ah, if they had a quarrel I'm not so sure. That sort of a woman drives a man mad sometimes just by inviting him on and then denying him."

"I don't believe, Silva, that Rougette was much given to denying herself to anybody—or that Julien would have especially cared."

"You don't know her. She's a coquette, and lately she's been imitating me."

"Yes, I've noticed that. But what would the imitation matter to Ferrard when he had the original?"

"I don't know, she may have made him jealous. I've heard that she's been making eyes at a beastly sort of a man that hangs about the *quartier*—a would-be painter. Bec, I think his name is."

"Nonsense! It could have amounted to no more than pique. One doesn't kill a common model even to

keep her from another man. That's a compliment reserved for serious women."

"Is it, Jacques? And yet I was jealous of her—seriously jealous. I could almost have killed her myself when I saw her there before everybody with her arms around him. It came over me like a dark cloud. What if——"

"What if what?"

"What if I did kill her?"

"What if you had killed her, you mean?"

"No, no. What if it was I?"

"You are raving. You——"

"Listen, Jacques. You remember how we were sitting at the ball?"

"Of course—in one of the pavilion boxes. But——"

"Wait! You were sitting directly behind me, and we were so far around to one side that we could hardly see Rougette when she first got off the float. But she moved forward until she was almost in front of us. And there was nothing between me and the dancing-floor but a short flight of empty wooden steps. And it was getting dark."

"What of it? You don't expect me to believe——"

"Let me finish. When I saw her with Julien beside her, a cloud came over me, as I've said. And the next thing I knew I was in that little room listening to Judge

Tardieu tell how she had been stabbed. I fainted, and——”

“It was enough to make any woman faint. You’re still overcome with the shock, Silva. Let me get you in.”

“Not yet. You said something to me about the tableau, you recollect, when Rouquette first came on. Then we stopped talking. Naturally you were watching the performance. Now tell me, when did you miss me first?”

“It was after Rouquette screamed.”

“Maybe it was. But you hadn’t been noticing me for several minutes.”

“I don’t know as I’d noticed you——”

“You hadn’t, for I crept down those steps and across the floor—*before she screamed.*”

“No, Silva—*after.* You did go down the steps. I followed you through the crowd and nearly caught up to you before you disappeared into the ante-room. I told the judge that you were with me, and you were to all intents and purposes.”

“Did you actually see me go down the steps?”

“I didn’t actually see you go, but——”

“Then the rest doesn’t matter. I crept down the steps while you were looking the other way. I was standing right behind Julien when Rouquette paused in

her dance to speak to him. It has all come back. I can see myself yet. And when he started to kiss her, I reached forward and struck. That's why she boxed his ears. It hurt—that stab—just a little. Did you know that a stab hurts only just a little bit until an instant afterwards? Well, it's so. The shock paralyzes the nerves, or something. Now, do you understand?"

"I understand that you ought to be in bed."

"But you must believe me, Jacques. I——"

"Stop it! You mustn't give way to hysteria here in the street. Don't you see that there's just one thing which makes your whole statement ridiculous?"

"What is that?"

"You say you stabbed her. Well, what did you stab her with? Are you in the habit of carrying a knife about with you in the bosom of your dress?"

"No—I never thought of that. I can't remember any knife."

"No wonder, for you didn't have one."

"Then I couldn't have done it."

Her strength gave way, and with her head on the painter's shoulders she began to sob. He spoke to her as one might speak to a child.

"Nothing dreadful has happened. You are worried

about Julien, and your imagination has done the rest.”

“It isn’t that I suspect him, Jacques.”

“What is it, then?”

“It’s because I see so clearly how I *might* have done it.”

Silva drew herself together, began arranging her hair, and went on in a firmer voice:

“I would even have liked to do it—I’m certain of that. All the while I was talking it gave me a positive pleasure to think of killing her. A voluptuous pleasure. Oh, I don’t know what it means, what has come over me. I have murder in my heart. It’s like gloating over something horrible.”

This time l’Estrange succeeded in getting the trembling woman inside her door. But she insisted upon his leaving her to go up stairs alone, saying that Julien might come and that he must find her waiting.

“He’ll be sure to come,” she repeated, “the minute he hears what has happened. That is—if he is free.”

“Why shouldn’t he be free? He intended, I understand, to dress at Rougette’s and to arrive at the dance in costume. Even if he was there you will find that he wasn’t identified.”

“You think of everything, Jacques. Then he may be here any minute.”

Pursued by this thought, Silva bade her friend good-night and hurried up to her apartment where, without calling for the maid whom she believed to be asleep in an adjoining room, she slipped on a negligée of soft blue silk. Then she touched a match to a gas-log, threw herself into an easy chair, and—lighting a cigarette—prepared for a vigil.

The building was run American fashion, without a concierge. It even had an arrangement of levers which made it possible to unlock the entrance door from every floor. There was a fire-escape at the back. If Julien was in flight she would disguise him as her maid. She would——

One impossible scheme after another raced through her excited brain, until she arrested herself with an exclamation:

“There! I’m going all over it again. Jacques is right. My nerves are unstrung, that is all.”

She compelled her muscles to relax, and closed her eyes so that she seemed to be sleeping. But her expression gradually clouded, as if she had come upon unpleasant dreams. In reality they were merely thoughts, memories among which her mind was wandering.

She recalled her father and mother, plain, wholesome, farmer folk, who had brought her up in their own simple, narrow creed and had looked at her in

pain and astonishment but with no inkling of understanding when she began to break away into ambitions and convictions of her own. She remembered the likeness of her handsome grandfather which she had found one day in the garret while she was a child—a grandfather of whom nobody ever spoke. Why? He was a most distinguished looking man, to judge from his portrait. She had felt from the instant she looked upon that skilfully done likeness, far too fine for the other rubbish, that mentally he was her true parent and would have understood even her wildest thoughts.

She recalled, too, her brother, so much older than she that the only feature which came distinctly back was his flaming red hair. Would not he also have understood had he not left home years too soon ever to know her save as an awkward little girl? His face as she tried to draw it now from memory seemed to have in it a trace of that grandfather's look. He had never come back, but she had once heard of him, and—well, well, there was no use thinking about that.

In avoiding this subject, she plunged into a deeper one—her own running away from home. At first it was to New York, to take a juvenile part on the stage; then to Europe, with false hopes of becoming a great

dancer. After that—the very room seemed to go dark and to reel as she was drawn down into this past. What depths she had sounded nobody knew, nobody ever would know. She no longer quite believed them herself. And the discontent which sometimes came to her in the midst of her success was as strange as the chance-discovered skill in her finger-tips which had given her independence. There were moments when she wanted to tear her tapestries to pieces, to fall upon them, trample them.

But the moods always vanished as quickly as they came, leaving a Silva so gentle that even La Gadelle seemed an unduly spicy nickname. It was in one such interval that Julien had entered her life, acknowledging her potent charm at once. There had been no tedious period of anxiety or doubt on either side. So now they were to be married and happy. They——

Silva started up, fully awake. Happy? Rougette was not the first or only one who had brought fear into their paradise. It was becoming plain that Julien was merely a boy who had yet to pass through those fires which melt away everything but the strong metals of good and evil. There was, no doubt, something maternal in Silva's intense longing for him, something almost ferocious in her agony of proprietorship. What

if he were to drag her through one martyrdom after another while he made his experiments and chased his glow-worms and marsh-lights? What if Rougette, not the first, were not to be the last?

“But if he killed her——”

Silva jumped to her feet and spoke aloud.

“If he killed her, maybe I can save him. And then he will be mine—totally, irrevocably mine. Even if we are fugitives, he will still be mine—more mine than ever. Great God! To have him mine, in hiding, on some far-away island! It would be too good to be true.”

A foot-fall sounded on the carpeted corridor outside, and she flew to the door. But it was only Leontine, her maid.

“I slipped out, *madame*,” she minced. “Thought you wouldn’t mind if I went to the ball.”

“No—though you should have told me. But what were you doing by my door?”

“Why, I saw the light in your window, and was coming to tell you—there’s a gentleman who brought me home. I made him stay down stairs in the vestibule, but he says he must come up to you at once, no matter if it is almost morning.”

“A gentleman? What gentleman?”

Silva forced herself to be outwardly calm, though

her heart was almost choking her. Could it be Julien in disguise? No, or he would not have consented to wait. He would have revealed himself to the maid. Who then?

"I don't know who he is," said Leontine. "He met me at the ball. He wants to see you about something that happened tonight."

"Tonight?"

"Yes, but what ails *madame*?"

"Nothing. It startled me—to find you listening."

"Ah, *chérie*! I wasn't eavesdropping. I'd just come up. You were alone, weren't you? Besides, I would only listen for you—not to you."

She wound her arms about her mistress's neck with the contrite abandon of a spoilt child. Silva smiled.

"You'd do anything for me, Leontine, I do believe—except, perhaps, let me keep a secret."

"*Madame* has many, far too many. It would be better if she would talk. When one talks there are often ways to help."

"Well, perhaps you'll be called upon to help before long. Meanwhile—this gentleman of yours. Let him come up, since you've already gone so far. Then wait within call till he has gone. He may be some troublesome fellow only half sober."

Leontine pulled a lever, and watched her escort—

who wore a clown's costume—ascend and pass into Silva's boudoir. When the door closed after him, however, her curiosity became more than she could endure. True, she had been warned against listening, but what are warnings if not accompanied by any particular risk in ignoring them?

"Don't know me, eh?" she heard the stranger saying as she put her ear to one of the panels. "You saw me once, though, right here with a lot of artists and high-fliers."

"I've entertained so many that your name——"

"Let it go, little one. If my name don't mean anything to you, try calling me the ex-king of the apaches. Lots still do, though these days I'm not generally bragging about it."

Silva laughed outright.

"There are so many ex-kings. If you're trying to frighten me, remember—La Gadelle isn't an *ex*."

Leontine retreated, for she thought the door was going to be opened, and by the time she discovered her mistake and was back at her listening-post, the tone of the conversation had changed.

"Yes, I saw it at your party," the ex-king was saying; "a straight little toad-sticker with a jeweled handle. Came near stealing it. Now I just ask you where it is."

"Gone!"

Silva's exclamation came from the farther side of the room and after a long silence that had been broken only by short, indistinguishable phrases.

"Gone! I saw it yesterday. It must—ah! Jacques was wrong. I did go, armed after all."

She was now moving rapidly about, and Leontine, in continual fear that some sudden impulse to put the visitor out would lead her mistress to come to the door, was forced to dodge back and forth, into hiding and out, as the voice approached or retreated. But she still managed to catch some of the talk, though in broken and scarcely intelligible fragments.

"So, you are here for blackmail, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"*Par exemple!* But one must live. I'm none of your professional blood-suckers, though."

Then another bit:

"Oh, no! You can't tame me."

"Damn it, Silva——"

"If you please, we won't call one another Silva and—whatever it is one calls you when one doesn't say *chien*."

Later again the voices sounded more amicable. The man's, in fact, was not only respectful but admiring:

"*Mon dieu!* Since you take it this way, I may be able to be useful to you."

To which the other replied:

“My dear Haquenée, don’t bank on this game. I tell you, I don’t care a fig for the assizes.”

They were approaching the door for certain this time, and Leontine slipped behind a pillar at a turn of the hall. From here she saw once more the man who had walked home with her. But now his face was exposed—a wonderfully thin and handsome face, she thought, though he looked more subdued than she could have imagined him. What a way her mistress had with men. And yet—why, she was actually giving him money. It was a purchased victory, then. Leontine’s blood boiled. The impudent scoundrel! She would show him.

Silva had disappeared into her room, and the clown was coming down the passage. With an audacity all her own, the maid stepped out.

“Thought you were going without wishing me good night, did you?” she demanded, her lips in a pout but a look of admiration creeping in spite of herself into her eyes.

“Who the devil are you?” La Haquenée spoke as one coming out of a dream. The look in the maid’s eyes became mocking and defiant.

“You’ll find out who I am if you try to put over anything in this house.”

“Put anything over?”

"Without asking my help, at least. Did you think I wasn't anywhere about?"

"So, that's the way it is? You little *chatte*! Come here."

As she did not move, La Haquenée advanced towards her, caught her suddenly around the waist, and with one hand fastening itself in the masses of her hair forced her head slowly back over her shoulders.

She struggled with all the frantic and slippery determination of an eel, but was unable to loosen the grip which held her. She slapped the apache with all her strength full in the face. He only laughed, continuing to bend her head and shoulders back until her face grew white with pain.

"Tell me when you've had enough," he suggested lightly.

"*Assez! Laissez moi!*" she panted.

La Haquenée released her waist and brought the flat of his hand violently down upon her upturned features. She winced, but did not move, though her eyes bored into his with the fury of a trapped wild creature. He lifted his hand again, and slowly the girl's eyes began to waver. The light of anger died out, turning to something submissive, suppliant.

"We understand each other, *hein?*"

"*Mais oui.* Don't strike me again."

“Kiss me, then.”

Leontine hesitated for just a second longer, then slipped her arms around La Haquenée’s shoulders and pressed her lips to his.

CHAPTER V

WHAT THE POLICE NEVER SEE

A POLICE investigation is often compared with a drag-net, encircling all possible suspects and bringing them before the judge like so many helpless fish to be weighed, measured, returned to their element or dissected at ease. In reality it is much more like a game of blind man's buff played in the dark where the actors pass and repass each other, sometimes unseen and unseeing, sometimes filled with vague suspicion, seldom with mutual recognition.

What would happen could some search-light be invented which would betray all the secrets hidden behind walls, retained by closed lips, or lurking as unexpressed thoughts in the depths of human minds? Unending disaster, most likely. Certainly it would be a hardy realist who would wish for such a light, and to use it without harm would require more wisdom than falls to the lot of most investigators.

However innocent your life has been, would you dare to publish it unreservedly to the world? No, our institutions are based upon the prevalence of ignorance, and would become terrible if sharpened by omniscience. It is better that we should continue to stumble on, more or less blindfolded, our perceptions limited to match our sympathies and understanding.

Thanks to the limitations in question, Silva Jonquille was permitted to pass the night away unmolested, half sleeping, half waking, before her fire. La Haquenée had told her that the murder had been committed with her own knife. His description of the blade left no room for doubt. It was a jeweled-handled paper-cutter, which she had always kept in a secret drawer of her desk. And it was gone.

She had met the discovery at first with exultation, and had overwhelmed the apache with her proud avowal of guilt. Did it not confirm the story of her dream which she had already confided to l'Estrange? But now the exultant mood was gone, and she felt but a vague, numb horror of herself.

For one thing, that fugitive life with a helpless and dependent Julian seemed no longer possible. It would have been so sweet to run away, avoiding the danger of railroad stations and sea-ports by means of false passports, assumed names and the thousand and one

simple stratagems used every day to trick the supposedly omnipotent Justice of the State. She would have known so well how to arrange it. Familiarity with adventurers of all sorts had taught her at least that. But with Julien in no danger, it would not be fair to drag him down to her level. She must release him, let him go his own way, alone and free.

And yet with the evidence of it before her in the shape of that empty secret drawer, she could no longer believe in her own guilt.

"Why? Why? Why?" she moaned. "I seemed to see it clearly a while ago. But now—there is something back of it all which I do not understand. What is it? I must find out or I shall go mad."

Day dawned without bringing any inner enlightenment, and she consented to take a *petit déjeuner* of coffee and rolls, not because she was hungry but to avoid what Leontine assured her would be a certain break-down if she did not eat. At about nine o'clock the doorbell rang.

"There he is!" she cried, coming out of the trance-like reverie into which she had fallen. "His staying away was what worried me. Now I shall be all right again, and know what to do."

But it was l'Estrange, not Ferrard, whom Leontine admitted.

"I have news for you," began the painter, stooping to kiss her hand—a mere act of courtesy in France, but one to which he managed to give an old-fashioned grace and seriousness.

"Good news?"

"At least it isn't bad. Julien came to me last night soon after I got home. He's there now, entirely free and unmolested, so there's nothing to be immediately anxious about."

"He came to you? Why not to me?"

"I was nearer. We should have foreseen, too, that he would not want to bring you into the matter. If he had been followed——"

"How could he have been followed, since he wasn't at the ball?"

L'Estrange lighted a cigarette and began pacing slowly up and down the room.

"Silva, I'm going to be frank with you. He was at the ball—I got that out of him at last."

"You mean that he came to you at first with a made-up story?"

"Naturally—we can't blame him for that. I was a comparative stranger, and he hesitated to take me into his confidence."

"Well, what did he say?"

"He said at first that he fell asleep at Rougette's

and didn't wake up until the middle of the night, when he found himself alone and decided to come to me and see what had happened."

"How do you know, Jacques, that it wasn't true?"

"I don't know how I knew. We painters learn some things which we don't understand very well ourselves. But I could see by his face that he was keeping something back, and I told him so."

"What did he say then?"

"He gave me the real story—after a little coaxing."

L'Estrange paused in his walk and seated himself upon a low stool near Silva's feet.

"Really, it isn't so bad," he went on. "It seems that he did go to Rougette's, just as I prophesied, and changed his clothes there. After that he showed himself nowhere without his disguise. He didn't even give his name at the ticket-office or speak to anybody inside. So that's one point gained."

Silva took a fresh cigarette, leaned forward and held the tip of it in the flame until the heat nearly scorched her fingers, then threw herself back in her chair. But as she offered no remark, the other went on:

"Then came the dance. Rougette, he says, suddenly looked up into his face and asked him to kiss her. He was surprised, for he knew you were there and it had never come into his head that she wanted to make

trouble. But he started to take the dare—it seemed the best way out of it. Before he could reach her lips, however, she boxed his ears—so hard that he half thought she was in earnest—and then drew him to her. I gather that she was trying to make it look as if he were fighting for the kiss against her resistance.”

Silva nodded, but seemed hardly to be listening.

“The next thing he remembers,” l’Estrange continued, “was her screaming and shoving him violently away. There was the sound of something tinkling to the floor. He didn’t stop to see what it was, but says he is certain it was a knife.

“It was dark by now, and he gained an exit without being seen—certainly without being recognized—though his dress caught on something and he had to abandon part of it. Still, his face wasn’t exposed until after he was safe in the street.”

“That’s enough, Jacques. I understand.”

“But it isn’t all. Here are the morning papers. They contain a full account of the crime, but no mention of either of you.”

He took a number of papers from his pocket as he spoke and spread them out for inspection. Silva scarcely glanced at the headlines.

“How does Julien think it was done?” she asked, listlessly.

"We discussed that," answered l'Estrange, regarding her curiously. "He thinks that the knife may have been shot from an air-gun by somebody hidden overhead among the decorations of the rafters."

"But that's preposterous. He would have heard it fly past him—besides, in that case it would have struck *him*, not her."

"It does seem so. But then it's only a theory. No doubt we'll be able to find a better one later on."

"We've a better one already. Don't you remember what I told you last night?"

"Your foolish dream? Come, Silva. That was all right during the first excitement, but you mustn't expect me to listen to such nonsense now, in broad daylight."

"Wait till you've heard everything. I had a visit soon after you left—a very strange one."

She went on to describe the call of La Haquenée and how he had come to extract money from her on the strength of the weapon which he had recognized in the judge's hands.

"It was my paper-cutter," she finished. "You know—my *miséricorde*. La Haquenée saw it at one of my free-for-all receptions, though how he happened to be present I don't know. Makes a business of pushing his way into places, I suppose. I was foolish enough

to show it on account of its beautiful handle. But he seems to have noticed the blade, too, though I'm sure I called no attention to that."

L'Estrange looked grave.

"An apache!" he said at last. "And you didn't show him the door?"

"No. How could I? He knew the truth."

"Then what did you do?"

"Don't be so sorry for me, Jacques. He wasn't such a bad sort. I met him on his own ground and won his admiration completely. Can you guess how?"

"That's not so remarkable. But how?"

"By boasting instead of denying. An apache adores the sort of a woman who isn't afraid to kill either an unfaithful lover or a rival. He understands that sort of thing. So I played up to him, and shouldn't wonder if I was in effect the Queen of the Apaches of Paris myself, this very minute."

"You don't mean that you pretended——"

"I told him much what I'd already told you, about my dream—only I didn't put it as a dream. Don't you see that this clenches it?"

"It clenches its impossibility, Silva. You must face the facts. Don't you see? In order to have taken that knife—in the sort of trance which you've described—you must have been dreaming from the mo-

ment you left here and have had the *miséricorde* with you all the time you were at my dinner, though you didn't even know that Rougette was to be at the dance. Do you pretend to remember that?"

"No, not yet. But maybe it will come—though you do make it hard."

"It will never come. And I want you to think of Julien. La Haquenée's story is ridiculous against yourself, but you can't help seeing how it increases Julien's difficulties."

"Julien's——"

"Certainly. Here's a peculiar knife, which you could neither have taken or used. But he could easily have done both. I presume he knew where you kept the thing?"

"Yes, but he never—don't tempt me, Jacques."

"What?"

"Don't you see that I *want* to believe him guilty, that I've been fighting with myself to relieve my conscience? For it is wicked—wicked to wish to have another in your power, even if you only mean to love him and take care of him."

The painter studied his vis-à-vis for a long, silent moment, as if she had been sitting before him for her portrait and he meant to put on his canvas not so much

her body as her soul. Gradually, however, his expression softened.

"I see. You *do* believe him guilty. And you forgive him. A woman's heart is a wonderful thing—when she is in love. A man could never do that."

"But *you* are still his friend. Do you mean that you think I'm wrong?"

"Yes, though I'll admit that appearances are very much against him. In fact, his case is so bad on the face of it that we'll have to treat it as altogether so. That will give you your chance to mother—to take care of him."

"What are we to do?"

"I've been thinking of that. Certainly we mustn't leave him to wander about the city at large. A glass too much, a chat with some boon companion—a word might ruin him."

"We'll run away together, then."

"Out of the question. You fainted before Judge Tardieu."

Silva turned pale.

"Then, if they've already connected me with the case——"

"But they haven't or we'd already have seen some signs of it. A single incident like that passes. They happen every day. But if either you or your lover

were to leave town the police would begin to link one thing with another. You know what stupid but methodical and painstaking gentlemen they are. So Julien must keep quiet until the truth itself comes out. You must watch over him. But you can't do it here. I'll tell you what—supposing you both come to live at my place?"

"But that would——"

"No, it wouldn't inconvenience me a bit. My arrangements are all made to go to Rome—for my annual visit at the Medici school. I'll get the duchess de Fayves to come and play chaperone for you, and Julien can lay low and pretend to be varnishing my pictures."

La Gadelle reached out a hand until it rested upon her visitor's coat sleeves.

"Jacques," she said gently, "I didn't know that you were in love with me."

"I didn't know it yet," the painter laughed.

"But you are. Nobody ever does such things for any other reason."

"Have it your own way, then. I suppose I *would* go pretty far rather than see harm come to a beautiful thing."

"Oh, it's that?"

"Let's call it that. Besides, I'm taking no risk. It was late when Ferrard came. Nobody knows he's

there. I was going to shut up the house, and the servants have all been dismissed—except Peters, my English butler. You don't know him, as he's just back from visiting his relatives, but he can be trusted with anything where I am concerned. If worst comes to worst, I can say that I let the place to you in complete ignorance."

"It's a bargain, then," cried Silva, rousing herself to a sudden resolve. "Only there will be difficulties."

"Yes; there's the apache."

"Bah!" I can manage him. But the duchess of Fayves will never——"

"She doesn't know——"

"She knows that I am La Gadelle, and there are limits even to your influence, my friend."

"In that case, you must manage. I leave tonight. Better get there early tomorrow. And don't go accusing yourself to Ferrard."

Silva stood for a long time looking into the blaze after l'Estrange had gone. It was true—she must not accuse herself to Ferrard. There was no knowing how he would take it. Better say nothing, either, about the poignard, now that there was no evidence that she had ever possessed it.

"We are safe. I'll have to be satisfied with that,"

she murmured, moving over to her desk and beginning to rummage among its litter of papers.

La Haquenée had said, she remembered suddenly, that the police had only the blade. Where, then, was the hilt? She had hunted for the complete poignard before, not for anything as small as a detached handle. So her hands fluttered about, trying to make sure that nothing had been overlooked. But moment by moment her activity became less and less intelligent, and finally ceased altogether. Overcome by her long vigil and the emotions she had gone through, Silva sank down before the desk, spread out her arms upon it for a pillow, and fell asleep.

When she woke, Leontine was standing beside her. "What are you doing here?" cried the mistress, starting up. "It seems to me that you are always spying upon me. You——"

"But, *madame!* I did not mean to startle you. Can you not tell me what is the trouble? The papers are full of a murder at the ball last night, and—but you are too nervous——"

"I am not nervous, only—why did you wake me up so suddenly?"

"I tried not to. But an old lady wishes to see you—not exactly a lady either, and not so very old. But oh, very, very *drôle.*"

"A lady?" Silva rubbed her eyes, trying to collect

her ideas. "What sort of a lady? Not the duchess——?"

"Oh, no. It's a Mrs. Granger. She says she used to know you at home, and that you will remember her."

"I know of no Mrs. Granger. I seem to have heard the name, though. Was it last night? I can't think. It may have been years ago. Wait! There is something I was looking for."

She made a thorough search this time, not only of the desk but of the room—to discover nothing.

"I had hoped—or maybe feared is the better word. Anyway it isn't here. So it's obvious at least that I didn't take it and bring part of it back."

Leontine started, half frightened.

"Is *madame* ill? Shall I tell the woman——"

"No, no. Don't mind me. I was only talking to myself—some nonsense. Let the lady in. I want to find out when it was that I heard her name."

Leontine withdrew, and a moment later Silva was staring into the face of the woman whom she had found with Judge Tardieu the night before. Further than that her recollection did not go. Nevertheless Mrs. Granger proceeded to gather her within her stout, motherly arms and to babble irrepressibly of old times until gradually the veil of forgetfulness lifted.

Salem; neighbors of her girlhood days; a thousand

things that had long since passed out of her life—yes, Silva remembered them, though vaguely enough. What did they matter? What did one mean by bringing them up at this late day? She could see no reason why the accident of once having lived in the same town should be made the basis of a renewed acquaintance in Paris. A chilly reception, however, was evidently beyond this caller's powers of comprehension.

"I found out where you lived from our hotel clerk," she chattered, taking a seat without waiting to be asked and untying the strings that held her quaint, old-fashioned bonnet—a bit of headgear which she had evidently clung to through many vicissitudes of fashion and fortune. "'Silva Jonquille?' says he. 'I don't need any book for her, m'am.' Eben and I were never so surprised in our lives."

"Who told you what name I was living under?" Silva demanded, suddenly realizing that this visit was even more incomprehensible than she had at first imagined. "I've never written home since my father and mother died. I didn't suppose that anyone else had my alias."

"Your parents certainly never mentioned it," admitted the other, assuming the expression proper to a conversation involving persons. "Like the rest of us, they were a lot cut up by your runnin' away. That

only shows how little we know of what's goin' to happen."

"But you haven't said where you got my name."

"Bless you, child, don't you remember last night? When you fainted everybody seemed to know you, and they insisted that your name was Jonquille. I thought at first that you must be married."

"But you didn't tell them that my real name was Marx?"

"To be sure I did—and a lot of good it did me. They treated me like a foolish old woman, as if I'd forgotten all I ever knew just because I happened to be in Paris."

Silva tightened her hands in her lap.

"Are you certain they thought you as foolish as they pretended?"

"Huh! I should say so. I'm not likely to forget it. But you needn't look so put out. I'll keep my mouth shut after this if you want me to—though I don't see why I shouldn't write home and tell 'em how you're gettin' on. Salem folks will be mighty proud of you. You see, none of us could believe that a young girl could run off to Europe without goin' more or less wrong. It was only human nature, and maybe the way we was brought up."

"I don't suppose it does really matter," said Silva,

relaxing. "My real name can mean nothing to the police, and it's nothing unusual for a woman in my position to live under a pseudonym, though I could have wished——"

"Of course it's nothing unusual. Naturally you couldn't know at first whether you were going to be a credit to us or not. And maybe if you hadn't been I wouldn't be so glad to see you. I suppose you think we're an un-Christian lot, but somehow it's a good deal easier to want to know an actress when she's famous than when she isn't. I hope I wouldn't have turned my back even if I'd found you in straits—but I'm not so sure. We're all pretty miserable sinners when you come right down to it."

"But I'm not an actress," cried Silva, lifting her head in surprise.

"Not an actress? Then what are you? How else can a woman get so everybody knows her, even hotel clerks and judges?"

Silva winced. She would never be able to explain to this benevolent old busybody that in Paris a woman may become known for her toilettes, her entertainments, the protests of the mothers of eligible sons, or even from the general curiosity she awakened as to the source of her funds. And yet she was filled with an unaccountable impulse to justify herself. It was in

obedience to this feeling that she got up and abruptly conducted her caller to the hidden work-room whose existence was known only to her maid and those immediately concerned with its operations.

Mrs. Granger, as the method of reproducing old tapestries was explained to her, was a study.

"Well, you must have taken me for a regular old ninny!" she exclaimed finally, throwing herself into an arm-chair. "Here I've been plumin' myself all the morning, thinkin' I was liberal-minded—disguisin' from myself, too, the plain fact that I was tickled to be acquainted with somebody whose picture I thought must be in the papers almost every week. And here you've been doin' honest fancy-work, just like Mrs. McMonagle back home. Imagine anybody bein' liberal-minded and patronizin' to *her*!"

"And yet you *are* famous," she continued, recovering something of her first look. "You must be, livin' in a place like this and known to all those people. Paris does beat all. To think that one can get so far up just by makin' tidies and rugs!"

"Gobleins are no such trifling matters," Silva managed to bring out.

"Bless me! Don't I know that? It's what you call art. Millie is crazy about such things. I hear all the talk, though most of it goes in one ear and out the

other. I must bring her here tomorrow to see them."

"Not tomorrow, Mrs. Granger. I'm going to move today, and tomorrow I won't be settled."

"Mercy!"

The good lady got hurriedly to her feet.

"If you're gettin' ready to move you won't want me here, gabbling your time away. But where are you goin' to move to? Something finer still, I suppose. This looks good enough to me, but of course the new places——"

"It's to a place on the boulevard St. Germain," put in Silva with a smile, "a very old, old place, I assure you."

"Then that's sensible. It's so expensive even at our hotel that I keep tellin' Eben we can't afford another day of it. He and Millie seem to have lost all sense of the value of money since we've managed to put a little by. Still they ain't quite fools, and you needn't be ashamed to have us come and see you no matter where you live."

It was too much, this conception of l'Estrange's eighteenth century mansion, and Silva, yielding to hearty and refreshing laughter, approached her visitor and kissed her on the cheek.

"My dear Mrs. Granger! I'd love to have you come—whether I'm settled or not. When I said old, I

meant antique. It's one of the loveliest residences in Paris, and furnished—oh, very simply, but by a great artist. He's leaving town and letting me have it for the season. That is, if I can get the right person to come and stay with me."

Before Mrs. Granger could respond with anything but an amazed dropping of the jaw, the telephone rang. As Silva had foreseen, the duchess of Fayves had found it impossible to act as chaperone. L'Estrange, who was at the other end of the wire, tried to soften the fact as much as possible, and repeated a long string of perfectly good excuses which her ladyship had given. But it was apparent that while genius and blood might claim almost any indulgence for itself, it could not pass on its privileges to one of the more strictly accountable sex.

"Something has happened," Mrs. Granger declared as Silva returned. "I see it in your face."

"It's only about my new *ménage*. The lady I was expecting to stay with me can't come, and—really, I don't know what to do."

"You don't—Silva, how big is this new house of yours?"

"Enormous. I was only going to live in a few rooms in one corner. But without anybody of the kind I want——"

“Say!” interrupted the other. “You don’t look as if your prosperity had made you stuck up—and I hate it at the hotel. It isn’t quite the place for pa, or Millie either, and she wants to stay here a while and study. If you could only let us all come and help you pay your rent——”

“You mean—you would?”

“Yes, and be glad of the chance. It isn’t every day you come upon somebody you used to know, when you’re travelin’ in a foreign land.”

La Gadelle was touched. Here were the old, familiar sentiments of a side of the world she had almost forgotten, and the chief difficulties of the new establishment seemed already as good as solved. As to the complications which the good Mrs. Granger was unwittingly bringing into the situation, they were as yet safely hidden behind the curtain of the future. And how strangely impenetrable that curtain sometimes is.

CHAPTER VI

A WELL-RECOMMENDED SERVANT

THAT same morning, one of the small exhibition-galleries which in Paris help to carry on the never-ending business of Art was invaded before the opening hour by a man with the slight nervous build of a grasshopper. So active were all his movements and gayly cynical was the twinkle in his eye that he might have passed for young had it not been for the severe cut of his somber black suit and his head of venerable gray hair.

Evidently he was not altogether a stranger, for the doors until now so forbiddingly locked swung open before him with a deferential promptness not entirely to be accounted for by the liberality of the *pourboire* which he slipped into the hand of the waiting attendant.

Once inside the main *salle*, the early arrival seated himself comfortably upon a velvet lounge, adjusted a gold-rimmed pince-nez and became immediately engrossed in the picture before him.

There was something about this picture which would have made known to the poorest critic in the world that it was considered the gem of the collection. It was hung with nothing above or below it and with plenty of vacant wall-space on either side; and the sun-light, which, after passing through the *salle's* glass roof, sifted from a false ceiling of white muslin, fell upon the canvas at precisely the proper angle. Moreover there was a special railing to keep meddlesome hands at a distance, and the lounge had been placed at a carefully calculated spot. Given this bright morning and this empty room, it would be difficult to imagine a painting displayed to better advantage.

“Judge Tardieu, is it not?” sounded an unexpected voice, destroying these ideal conditions as suddenly and completely as if a bomb had been dropped from the sky.

Tardieu—for he it was—turned impatiently and discovered that a woman in a fashionable but rather mannish tailor-made dress had quietly taken a place beside him. She was perhaps thirty—maybe a little more, maybe a little less, it was difficult to say—neither very plump nor very thin, obviously intelligent, and with a suggestion of softness and beauty, especially in her eyes, that was obscured but not quite extinguished

by the severity of her attire and her business-like expression.

"At your service, mademoiselle," returned the judge, having assured himself that here was not the sort of a woman who ordinarily seeks a gentleman's acquaintance unasked. "Are you an art-student? I see you know the only proper way to visit a picture show. Later, when the crowds come——"

"Oh, no, I'm not a student," interrupted the intruder, still perfectly matter of fact. "I followed you."

"Followed?"

"Yes, you were pointed out to me as you left your lodgings where I was waiting in the street in hopes of meeting you. Here are some papers which will perhaps explain."

She handed him a neat bundle of documents—her passport, *permis de séjour*, and a paper even more explicit and bearing like the others her photograph and attested signature. Tardieu studied the likenesses carefully, scrutinized the unflinching original beside him until certain that there could be no possible deception or mistake, then cordially rose and extended his hand with the slightly elaborate air of one conscious of obeying a foreign custom.

"A representative of the Ferris McClue Agency is

always welcome," he said, resuming his seat. "Miss Clara Hope doubly so. I've heard of you, and trust you've brought some news of The Ferret himself."

"Only what you probably know—that he is in Europe somewhere, looking for his pet bugaboo, Marle, Le Caillou, or whatever you at present call him."

"I have no name for the bugaboo," smiled the judge. "But I wish he was laid by the heels or that somebody would prove that no such person ever existed. Until something of the sort happens I suppose we've seen practically the last of Mac. Don't you really know where he is?"

"No."

"That's odd—or rather it isn't."

"Not odd?"

"That I shouldn't possess your confidence."

"That isn't the explanation, Judge Tardieu, I assure you."

"Well, well! In any case, the last time I saw him—he calls himself Lepadou over here, you know—the last time I saw him it was the same old bee in his bonnet. He believes in the super-criminal legend. One might almost say that he started it."

"That's why I'm here, *m'sieu le juge*."

"To catch Le Caillou yourself?"

"Or prove his non-existence. Why not?"

"No reason at all, except that the rest of us have given it up."

"Mr. McClue hasn't."

"My dear young lady, if your story is true we don't really know that McClue is still alive."

Tardieu failed to observe a slight shiver that passed through the woman beside him, and continued in an impersonal tone:

"At least *I* don't. And I don't know a thing about Caillou. There hasn't been a move so much as attributed to him since that Boncoeur affair which your employer helped us unravel."

"Unravel, but not to wind up, Judge. The super-criminal escaped."

"Exactly, if he was a super-criminal—just when we were ready to put the handcuffs on him. Since then it has become unfashionable to lay every mysterious crime at his door. We French demand a frequent change of mode. But I'd like to hear your opinion."

"About my employer? I think he is alive, though it has been a long time since he has answered any letters or given any sign of existence whatever."

"Then, unless you have your reasons—but I was thinking about the super-criminal."

"I believe in him, too," said Clara. "Where there so much smoke there must be a fire."

"I'd almost like to think so, Miss Hope, and sometimes I talk just as you do. But then I am old and romantic, while you are young——"

"And romantic?"

"Heaven save us! Aren't you? You're a woman."

"Even women have to be practical these days."

"Then no wonder the world isn't what it used to be. As to the smoke, I suppose you're referring to that woman drowned at a little fishing village near Marseilles last summer, and the other one at Venice——"

"No, was referring—do you suppose you could get me employed by the police as a special operator?"

"On these so-called drowning cases?"

"Not at all. Something here in Paris."

"Undoubtedly I could, if you'd accept——"

"I'd accept employment on the case of the artists' model who was murdered at the ball last night."

Tardieu stared.

"You're up to date. But of course—the newspapers."

"I haven't read them."

"Then why that case in particular? How do you come to know of it?"

"In the first place, I was there," Clara responded. "And in the second, it seems to me that too many of your mysteries are aquatic."

"Permit me to say that you are a very observing young lady."

The judge shot out his remark under his breath but with the vehemence of a string of bullets. Then he leaned back against the upholstery of the lounge, half closed his eyes, and seemed to give himself up to the lazy luxury of his pose. When he spoke again it was with the air of changing the subject.

"What do you think of this picture? It's been sold to one of your millionaires and is only on exhibition here before being shipped to New York. The price I can guarantee as superb. Do you like the quality?"

"I know nothing of art," answered Clara Hope without betraying the slightest surprise at the question. "That is, not what you Europeans call knowing. But I can see that this is the picture that Rougette Picot and her partner caricatured at the ball."

"Good! Anything else?"

"Yes; they missed the point of it. The woman isn't being dragged down by The Squid at all, but by something within her heart. She could easily reach up her arms—they are free—to that projecting bit of the fountain above her head, and she would be saved. But she wants to be dragged down. I should say she was afraid of something worse, something which she might do if she lived."

"Go on."

"There is nothing more, except that the painter must have wonderful powers of observation and sympathy. It would be a good thing for a detective to know what that man knows. But he would never tell."

"You are phenomenal, Miss Hope, and infinitely right. You've hit, too, upon the most remarkable thing in l'Estrange's works—all of them. They are painted from knowledge, and I may add—pity. But he *does* tell what he knows. The trouble is we haven't the brains to translate the information from his medium of thought to our own—which is probably quite as well for ourselves and a good deal better for a lot of other people. If we were all to become seers—heavens! There wouldn't be jails enough in Paris to hold the people we'd be foolish enough to arrest."

"You'll get me the engagement, then?" asked Clara, harking back to the original subject. "It would be an enormous help if I had the machinery of the Police Force at my disposal."

"I'll do better than that," declared the judge, rousing himself. "I'll trick the chief into engaging you, too. Just at present he and I are busy trying to prove each other wrong on every possible occasion. All you need to do is to go to him, present your credentials, and tell him I would have nothing to say to you. Balai will bite like a trout."

Instead of proceeding at once to put this theory to the test, Clara went out, ordered a tardy breakfast at the first restaurant she came to, and buried herself in the newspapers.

The *bal des Tapettes* had seized her imagination from the first, and from the moment when she saw that there was actually a squid among the masqueraders she had watched carefully every move of the hidden drama which she sensed to be passing before her eyes. Thus, in spite of the crowd, neither the attack upon the model nor the quick removal of her body from the scene had altogether escaped her. She had hovered about the entrance to the impromptu tribunal, eagerly noting faces and remembering the names let fall by those who came and went. She had even been one of the witnesses summoned to give testimony, and before leaving the building she knew the name of the beautiful woman whom a famous painter had taken away in his arms.

Not only this, but she had kept her eye on a clown who had entered the judge's presence masked and come out with his face uncovered—though it remained so for only an instant. And when, considerably later, he started away with one of the dancers tucked masterfully under his arm, she followed him and noted the number of the apartment house on the boulevard Ras-

pail wherein he and his companion disappeared. Had La Haquenée been less eager to resume his false face, it is possible that Clara would have let him go with a passing glance. But it is of such little things as this that the plots of real life are composed.

In calling on Judge Tardieu her chief object had been to ascertain if the authorities had any information which was being withheld from the public. This object was now attained, and having finished with the newspapers she found herself little further advanced than she had been the night before. A lot of details interesting in themselves but lacking those essential facts which might have linked them together—what did they amount to? The police reports to the press showed that the crime was being treated superficially, as something picturesque rather than important. Was it really worth while to go to the chief and hear these same details all over again?

While debating the question and casting about for some possibly better use of her time, Clara called for the *Botin*—that incomparable encyclopedia of general information which serves as directory in Paris—and looked up the address of Silva Jonquille. For the omission of this name, both from Tardieu's conversation and from the published accounts, had impressed her as one of those slightly curious circumstances which

experience had taught her it was always well to investigate. Hadn't Miss Jonquille fainted in the anteroom of Justice? Hadn't she been taken away by the very painter before whose masterpiece the judge that morning had been lost in thought? A picture which had figured, too, in the fatal masquerade. An interesting little series of facts, surely. Why, then, was no mention made of it in the otherwise so conscientiously minute reports of the journalists?

The *Botin* itself was laconic in regard to Silva Jonquille, giving merely her name and address without any hint as to her profession or social status. But the address was on the boulevard Raspail—the very number to which Clara had traced the clown.

"It isn't much of a clue," she mused, as she handed the book back to the *garçon*. "The man was probably seeing a servant-girl home. Still, he was at the preliminary inquiry and didn't seem particularly anxious that anyone should study his face. I think I'll try to find out what's known about him, unless that also happens to be a secret."

Fifteen minutes later she sat in the great, bleak office of the chief of police on the quai des Orfèvres, with Balai regarding her inquiringly from the height of his official desk. He proved to be less susceptible to personal prejudice than Tardieu had described him,

for when she mentioned that she had been unable to find out all she wanted from the judge he showed neither surprise nor interest.

"Your credentials are excellent, Miss Hope," he said in a business-like tone. "But in regard to the *bal des Tapettes* case, Judge Tardieu and myself for once are agreed."

"Then I gather that you regard it as one of those cases of which the less that is known the better," retorted Clara somewhat tartly.

"Did you gather that that was the attitude of the judge?" asked the chief, suddenly dismissing his clerk and beginning to study his visitor more attentively than before.

"That was my impression."

"Then you're certainly a good operator. The fact is, Judge Tardieu has the shivers about this case. He's always on the lookout for some higher-up criminal, some omnipotent, shadowy sort of crook. Last night a woman known as Silva Jonquille came into our inquiry unasked, and fainted away. To make matters worse, her escort was a great artist—one of the judge's special admirations. And he's afraid that the evidence, if we dig into it too far, will lead to something unpleasant."

"And you agree with him, *m'sieu le chef*?"

"I agree with him as to the tactics to be pursued—though I haven't taken the trouble to tell him so. Miss Jonquille is one of the prize exhibits of Paris, a privileged character. L'Estrange, the artist in question, belongs to the old nobility, and would be certain to resent even the most perfunctory investigation of one of his friends. I don't care a fig for art, but I know better I hope than to go out of my way to make the Department obnoxious to *society*."

"Still, if you had something definite against her——"

"But I haven't, nor even a suspicion. The murder of the Picot woman bears every mark of being the commonest sort of an apache affair."

"How about the knife? According to the papers there was nothing especially common about that. Would an apache be likely to carry such a weapon?"

"You wouldn't think so, would you? It was the knife, no doubt, which started the judge on his theory of an uncommon criminal. But let me tell you something, Miss Hope. An apache is a Frenchman, and almost all Frenchmen have this artist streak in them. Why, I cultivate roses myself. And there is nothing in the world which an apache is so much interested in as knives. So there's nothing extraordinary in supposing that this one made a hobby of rare blades."

Clara's face had taken on a look of resignation, as if she had met defeat and was prepared to accept it. This enhanced the startling effect of her words when she quietly inquired:

"What if I could show you a distinct connection between Silva Jonquille and a certain apache present at the ball last night?"

"Ah! That would be different."

The chief leaned forward on his elbows in an attitude of thoroughly aroused interest. Clara went on to tell of her glimpse of the clown and her tracking him to the Jonquille woman's address. But at the end of her narrative Balai shook his head.

"Excellent police work, Miss Hope," he admitted. "Excellent—but it's not enough. You only *think* that he may have been an apache from the looks of his face. And you don't know that he really had anything to do with Miss Jonquille—he merely entered the same apartment house. Ordinarily such a lead would be well worth following. But the Department is in political hot water just now. A *gaffe*, as we call it, would ruin me."

"Just what is a *gaffe*, *m'sieu le chef*?"

"Any sort of a foolish mistake."

"Then why not leave the risk of making one to me?"

It isn't going to be so easy to identify that knife?"

"Perhaps not."

"And of course you already see the difficulty of finding out who was in that Squid costume?"

"Yes, he seems to have arrived in disguise. The Picot woman must have known him, but unfortunately she can no longer tell us."

"There remains," said Clara, "the possibility of getting some information from Miss Jonquille. Are there no suspicious characters among her associates?"

"No; she receives simply everybody—which is the same as *having* no associates. Of course there's Julien Ferrard, her fiancé. But he is harmless enough."

"Would you mind describing him?"

"Why, he is also a painter, though not a very successful one. He comes of a good family, though, and is remarkable for nothing especially, but—*mon Dieu!* Ferrard is a little lame. I'd completely forgotten it."

"The Squid was also a little lame, according to the newspapers," prompted Clara. "Is that what you mean?"

"Exactly. It was so lame that one didn't think to call it lameness."

"Then that, at least, is a point in Ferrard's favor."

"How so?"

"It looks as if the excess was put on—for the pur-

pose of *suggesting* Ferrard. A lame man would naturally try to minimize his own infirmity in public, especially if he were bent on maintaining a disguise for the purpose of committing a crime."

"The crime, Miss Hope, may have been unpremeditated."

"What, with all his care to arrive incog, and coming armed? We're not supposing that it was an apache now. Surely Ferrard would have had no ordinary reason for carrying anything so out of keeping with his costume as a dagger. But of course he might have put on the extra lameness hoping that we would arrive at these very conclusions."

"Too subtle," objected the chief. "The rest of your argument——"

"I've something still better. Was Ferrard seen at the ball?"

"No one reported him."

"Then that's a mystery in itself, since the woman he is engaged to was so much in evidence. He may have been *kept* away, impersonated—who knows what? Come, chief! Let me find out more about this Silva Jonquille who first sits with l'Estrange in a box, then faints away at the death of an artists' model. I'm not afraid of *gaffes*, and I'll take everything on my own responsibility."

"By Jove! If you'll do that—if I could really *get* something on these people! But what do you want me to do?"

"Can you have me recommended as a servant to one of Silva's friends?"

"Unless I flatter myself. But why not to her direct?"

"Because if she has anything to hide she will be expecting just such a move. If, however, you know of a friend——"

"There is the duchess de Fayves. She was at a dinner given in Mademoiselle Jonquille's honor the night of the ball. But if she takes you we won't be much further advanced."

"Leave it to me. They must exchange visits. I think I can manage it alone from that point."

Access to the duchess proved to be astonishingly easy, for the credentials furnished by Balai would have convinced a money-lender. And though the duchess was herself in no need of a servant, she was still smarting with regret at having had to refuse l'Estrange a favor and anxious to make any reasonable amends provided only that they did not cost much personal sacrifice.

"If you are willing to go into a new establishment," she began, when Clara had been introduced, "I think I

can place you, temporarily at least. An acquaintance of mine is moving into larger quarters, and I dare say is anxious for all the help she can get."

Clara waited patiently for the name and address, and was barely able to repress a start when she learned that she was being sent to Silva Jonquille in person. This was sheer luck. The address, too, was unexpected.

"Boulevard St. Germain," said the duchess. "She's going to spend the season in a house belonging to l'Estrange, the painter."

This was the climax.

CHAPTER VII

A MANSION AND ITS INMATES

SILVA JONQUILLE arrived at her new residence late on the morning following her talk with Mrs. Granger. She had carefully avoided all appearance of moving, thinking it better not even to bring a trunk, and the maid, Leontine, following her from the public taxicab, carried all her luggage in a couple of suit-cases.

The door of the mansion was opened by a slightly stoop-shouldered but very dignified manservant with a pale, smooth-shaven face, hair so dark that it suggested an attempt to hide his age, and eyes which peered out with near-sighted anxiety from behind a pair of gold-rimmed, violet-tinted glasses.

"Are you——?"

"I am Peters, ma'am. The Grangers have already arrived, and Mr. Julien, I believe, is in the studio. Madame's room is ready. Shall I show her to it?"

"Not yet, Peters. How did you know me?"

"But nobody else was expected, ma'am. Besides, if

you will pardon my saying so, I saw you here the night of your dinner, though I was just home from England and did not serve."

"I see. Did—did the doorman I sent you put in an appearance?"

"The individual calling himself La Haquenée, m'am? He did, though I rather fancied it was some mistake. Indeed, I'd hoped that madame would let me chose the other servants."

"I'm sorry, Peters, but I'm afraid you'll have to put up with those we have."

"But surely you'll allow me to change the creature's name? Haquenée, if you'll pardon me for saying so, means *horse*. Now if I might call him Bidet, which also means horse, it would at least sound more respectable."

"As to that, settle it with him. I'm not particular."

"Very good, m'am. And what am I to do about Mrs. Granger? She insists on *working*, ma'am. She has practically taken control of the kitchen, and her husband and daughter—but perhaps I am going too far in expressing myself?"

"No, no. Tell me. What are they doing?"

"The gentleman is peeling potatoes, and the young lady is wiping the dishes which are to be used for luncheon. I——"

"I know, Peters. It is dreadful," cried Silva, stifled with sudden laughter. "But what am I to do? You see, Mrs. Granger is quite beyond my control."

"Yes, ma'am. In that case there's only one thing more. A young woman called, asking for a position as maid of general housework."

"A *bonne à tout faire*? Oh, I hope you didn't engage her. Of course we need one, but——"

"No, ma'am. I told her that I had no authority. But she insisted on waiting."

"Then tell her to go. I can't have strangers in the house."

And waving Leontine before her, Silva started for the suite on the second floor which had been prepared for her own especial use. But she hadn't taken six steps before Peters came hurrying after her, bearing a silver tray.

"I forgot to say," he apologized, "that there was a letter for you."

"From the duchess of Fayves," murmured Silva in surprise, hurriedly breaking the ducal seal.

"I couldn't possibly arrange things so as to become one of your charming household," the duchess had written, "and yet I was desolate not to be able to do *something* for you on account of our mutual friend. Fortunately it happens that a young woman with the

best imaginable recommendations has just presented herself, and I am sending her on as I know that you, with that big house on your hands, will be glad of all the service you can get. She (Clara Hope is her name) has been in the service of one of my most intimate acquaintances, now living abroad, and I am writing this so that you will know that the note I gave her for you was not prompted merely by a desire to get rid of her."

"It's about the new girl," said Silva, handing the open letter to Peters. "This of course alters the matter and you will kindly engage her at once."

It was thus that the blundering and clumsy Law, assisted for once by a fine instrument, succeeded in penetrating the carefully guarded stronghold of the faubourgh St. Germain as easily as if it had been a common boarding-house. Clara, once formally installed, was less elated than surprised. This was not the sort of a household she had expected to find about La Gadelle, the privileged beauty of Bohemian Paris.

In the first place, there was Peters, so haughtily correct and English. It was difficult to think of him as serving anybody not legitimately listed either in *Burke's Peerage* or the *Almanach de Gotha*. He was, she soon learned, a hold-over from the l'Estrange *ménage*. But what about the stout, obviously Ameri-

can woman who bustled into the room where she had insisted on waiting until the mistress's arrival—a woman who introduced herself as Mrs. Granger, called her “my dear,” told her to make herself perfectly at home, and volunteered the information that she and her husband and daughter were old neighbors of Silva's? Wholesome, vigorous New England morality fairly radiated from Mrs. Granger's face, while the daughter, Millie, who came in shortly after her, was a charming picture of modern but unsullied girlhood.

Of the red-faced man, wearing a skull-cap as if to protect a scantily thatched cranium from the morning chill, she was not quite so sure. He was undoubtedly Granger, for no sooner had she caught sight of him, sticking his head in at the door about five minutes after his wife and Millie had gone, than she heard him called with marital authority by a voice that was unmistakable.

“Eben!” repeated Clara to herself. “Eben Granger. He's evidently a character, though whether he's as foolish as he looks remains to be seen. He comes from America—that's the main point.”

Indeed it was the one thing which impressed her, this bevy of Americans claiming to be Silva Jonquille's townsfolk. It was in the United States that Marie, alias Le Caillou, the supposed Squid, had first given

signs of existence. Was she on the trail at last, or was here but a chance coincidence, a will-o'-the-wisp tending to lead her astray? Like Silva's sudden change of domicile, it might mean much—or nothing at all. She determined to wait and not to theorize.

The arrival of Silva and her personal maid she viewed from a distance and with considerable disquietude until the letter from the duchess was produced. Up to that point it was plain, from the easily understood pantomime, that the chances of an intruder in that house were few and far between. The letter, however, changed everything, and Clara was preparing to hide her eagerness in accepting the coming engagement when she was visited—not by Peters but by La Haquenée, whom she recognized with an inward start of astonishment.

"You're to stay," he announced, in easy-rolling patois. "I'm to show you your room. *Viens.*"

"Then why does the *maître d'hôtel* come and engage me?" demanded Clara, in more correct but less rolling French.

"Peters'll see you later," grinned the doorman. "Just now he's peeved at having you put in over his head. This is a hard day for *le maître*. First me, then the Grangers, and now you. He's used to having his under-servants cut out of cardboard."

Clara walked thoughtfully to her quarters in the servants' wing, carrying her own bag. The sight of La Haquenée actually in the service of the new establishment thrilled her in much the same way as the finding of a human footprint in the sand must have thrilled Crusoe upon his desolate island. How had he come there? Was he an old servitor of La Gadelle's? Certainly he did not look the part. Those thin, mobile white hands, which might have been a pick-pocket's, that handsome, cruel and for the moment good-naturedly insolent face bespoke the apache, the out-and-out and daring criminal more clearly than ever. What possible event, recent or of long ago, could have thrown him into Silva Jonquille's path? That was something which must be discovered. In the meanwhile his very presence gave an air of significance to her initial success. She had not introduced herself into this outwardly so impeccable mansion for nothing, and might be able to accomplish much, even supposing that the forgery of her original letter to the duchess should eventually become known.

And suddenly it came over her—the sense of nearness to the heart of some great mystery. The bright, sunlit corridors were dark as with unseen shadows, the very curtains of her amazingly sumptuous servant's room sinister with the spirit of a haunting, indescrib-

able, impalpable danger. At the same time the absence of McClue, her total ignorance of his whereabouts and even of his continued existence, struck her like a blow. If only she could have felt *him* as clearly as she felt the presence of something monstrous, of something too evil for normal comprehension and only faintly to be described even by such a word as The Squid!

But what a mansion it was in which she found herself. It had, when rid of all haunting and imaginary phantoms, an air of exquisite, chastened luxury—a luxury not attributable to the abundance of its furnishings but rather to the studied absence of any object which was not either strikingly beautiful or actually conducive to comfort. White-painted woodwork; staircases of the simplest possible construction but of masterly grace and workmanship; windows fitted with ancient diamond-shaped panes or else of utterly transparent plate and opening upon balconys with stone balustrades of a fashion not to be obtained of the modern builder at any price; enormous, high-ceilinged rooms with parquet floors, of an emptiness suggesting Japanese interiors save for here and there a rug, a bit of tapestry, a table worthy of a place among heirlooms and now and then an unexpected burst of color in some mural decoration; the flash of an ancient silver sconce,

or the soft gleam of a piece of statuary—these were the features which chiefly claimed attention.

“I have dreamed of such places,” breathed Clara, taking advantage of her momentary liberty to make a tour of inspection. “The l’Estrange touch is everywhere, and anything more innocent and fine I never saw. How can crime or criminals have any possible foothold in the house of such an artist?”

She wandered down to the *grand salon* on the first floor, half inclined to believe that the house after all was a sufficient guarantee for its inhabitants, when—passing on to the main dining-hall—she chanced to witness an encounter between La Haquenée and Silva’s maid. Leontine was carrying a small package, which she handed to the apache without a word. He, in turn, slipped it into his pocket, and the two separated, unaware that they had been watched yet with an air of secrecy and understanding of the worst possible augury.

A moment later, through an open door, Clara caught sight of Millie Granger, her face flushed with pleasurable excitement. She was almost immediately joined by La Gadelle, who halted her to ask:

“Where is Mr. Ferrard, do you know?”

“He’s upstairs in the studio,” said Millie.

“But I’ve just come from there.”

"I know. He has been taking me around the house, showing it to me. But you'll find him in the studio now, if he hasn't gone to get ready for lunch."

It seemed for an instant as if the two women were regarding each other askance, instinctively taking each other's measure—the one so young and fresh, with all the weapons of youth lying as yet untried within her reach; the other ripe, exotic, skilled, but already past the zenith of her power. And then Miss Jonquille lightly patted her guest upon the cheek, hoped that she was going to be happy in her new home, and turned away in the direction of a smaller dining-room where lunch was being prepared. Could it be that the two already were rivals, that they sensed a coming enmity and had in that short instant begun hostilities? If so, the combat promised to be long and deadly, as neither looked as if she would easily give up.

Seeing the way clear, Clara retreated to the top of the house, reminded that she herself had yet to visit this studio where so many famous canvases must have been painted. A young man, limping slightly but otherwise attractive enough, was just coming out of the door. This, of course, was Julien Ferrard. And so absorbed was he in his own—and to judge from appearances not very pleasant—thoughts that he passed her without a sign of being aware of her presence.

But it was the studio which interested Clara chiefly. A huge, square chamber, occupying more than half of the garret floor, the slating of the original mansard roof largely supplanted by glass, it was evidently designed solely with an eye to utility and convenience. A heap of logs in a mammoth fire-place lay ready to give a touch of artificial warmth should the weather demand it, and there was a model's throne, a table, a screen or two, a few chairs and other necessary properties. Its pictures alone, however, gave it its tone. They covered the walls, loaded down the easels and rose in heaps in the corners. And it was something about these pictures, or rather about two of them, which sent that tingle down the intruder's spine, apprising her that she stood on the brink of discovery.

One of these, a wash-drawing not yet finished and standing on an easel by itself, was conspicuous from its brazen lack of harmony with the rest of the collection. It represented a young girl vigorously scrubbing her face with a cake of soap. The composition was simple, commonplace and engagingly comic, and Clara saw at a glance that its model must have been Millie Granger. Not yet fairly settled in the house, and already having La Gadelle's rival in youth if not in beauty pose for him! Did Ferrard really feel so sure of himself as to dare the anger of his fiancée (and such a fiancée!), or

was he recklessly seeking distraction from thoughts too terrifying to be borne?

The other picture opened an entirely different vista of possibilities. It was a landscape done in oils in what she was by this time able to recognize instantly as the l'Estrange manner; and it was propped precariously on a chair, as if it had been hastily lifted from the easel and thrown aside—unquestionable masterpiece as it was. But what riveted her attention was an ugly gray smudge in the foreground, where most of the paint had been removed by turpentine and scraping.

Was this but a bit of correction or alteration, undertaken by the artist himself and left unfinished? She felt certain that it was not, though she was compelled to base her judgment upon the still fresh smell of the turpentine rather than upon any technical knowledge of painting in general.

She had heard of the rivalries of art and of the unbelievable heights to which they were sometimes carried. Could this be an instance in point, a jealous clawing at the edges of a beautiful thing, with the intent to restore it to approximately its original condition, thus giving it a blemish not easily detected but certain to provoke criticism if once exposed to the public? Her training was inadequate for weighing the likelihood or unlikelihood of such a proceeding. She wished she knew more

of art, wished above all that she could guess what the picture originally looked like. There might once have been a figure in this ruined area of foreground, and with knowledge of the figure one might arrive at a thousand motives for its erasure at the hands of somebody. Everything, too, pointed to Julien as the somebody in question. He had the run of the place and all its treasures were at his mercy.

But as she made the round of the canvases, looking for other signs of molestation and finding none, her thoughts gradually left Julien aside and took a wider circle. It was dawning upon her that there might be an explanation, simpler than any which she had as yet entertained, to account for l'Estrange's connection with a very dark and doubtful business. She had looked upon him as a possible admirer of Silva's, certainly as a partisan of a group of people whose conduct left much to be explained. But what if he were the victim, the real object of the whole attack? What if the suspicious circumstances in which even Ferrard and La Gadelle found themselves, were the result of some larger and more far-reaching plot of which they were either the tools or the innocent playthings?

She had been struck from the first by the seeming inadequacy of the actors in this drama which she felt

to be moving around her. But perhaps she had not yet encountered the star performer, the playwright.

Clara was very much overwrought, and suddenly felt the need of her partner. Dear old Mac, with his paradoxes and boyish whimsicalities! If he were there, would he laugh at the picture of the girl with the cake of soap, or give all his attention to the damaged landscape? Without him she could neither laugh nor think to any purpose, so she came very near to crying instead. For just now, reaching out as it were in the dark, blindly speculating upon the possibilities of the situation, it had been as if her fingers had come in vague but unmistakable contact with one of the clammy tentacles of The Squid.

CHAPTER VIII

SIDE LIGHTS

"THE most difficult person in the house to get along with," wrote Clara a few days later in a report which she was preparing for the *juge d'instruction*, "is the English butler, Peters.

"The first day I was here I happened to come down late to the servants' luncheon, and he insisted on waiting on me and calling me 'lady,' as if I were one of the guests. Since this unamiable bit of sarcasm he has avoided me, and absolutely refuses to give me any orders. So I go about much as I please, helping Mrs. Granger or doing whatever needs to be done—all on my own initiative.

"The obvious explanation, of course, is that he is put out at not being allowed to engage his own staff and hopes that if left to my own devices I will demonstrate my uselessness to everybody and pave the way for my own discharge. It may be, too, that he suspects that I'm not what I pretend to be, and as a faith-

ful servitor of the house is giving me rope to help me hang myself, as the saying is.

“But there is another thing I want to say about Peters—much more startling and not to be questioned at all. *Nobody here has ever seen him before.* I’ve had to be very discreet in my inquiries, but am no longer in doubt of the fact. A man named Peters has been in the l’Estrange service for a long time, but left for England to visit relatives before La Gadelle was ever entertained here. He returned the night of her dinner, or the night of the *bal des Tapettes*, if you prefer—at least so it is said—but did not show himself. He was on hand the morning that Silva, the Grangers, Silva’s maid and La Haquenée arrived. L’Estrange had already gone, and he had to introduce himself. He seems to conform to the description which l’Estrange gave Silva of his faithful butler, but that is as far as the identification goes.

“Now how do we know that this Peters is the real Peters at all? That the real Peters isn’t dead or otherwise disposed of? Who knows what happened between the departure of l’Estrange and the arrival of the Grangers, who were the first ones to whom this butler afterwards opened the door? *We* don’t, certainly, and I for one find it impossible to take it for granted that the present Peters is the man that l’Es-

trange left in charge. You can see, after what I've already written in regard to the likelihood of a plot against the painter, how exceedingly grave is even the mere chance that such a substitution can have been made.

"I have tried every means but one to make Peters talk to me, whoever he really is. But results are negative. I hate to go further, though he looks to me most decidedly like a man who has an Achilles' heel, and the feeling of desperation which sometimes comes over me is likely to lead me into anything."

She wrote several pages more about the case, without however saying what means she had left untried or explaining what she meant by an Achilles' heel. Then she sealed the letter and went to post it, her movements being covered by a lucky order to go out and buy some cigarettes for Ferrard.

When she sought him in the studio later for the purpose of delivering her purchase, he was so busy adjusting an easel close to the north light that she was able to slip behind a Japanese screen at the other end of the room.

What occupied him was the damaged landscape already noted, and after regarding it for several minutes with an almost ferocious stare, the young man snatched a brush and began covering the smudge with

a soft green tint matching the surrounding foliage. So absorbed was he in his work that he failed to notice even a second opening of the door and the entrance of Millie Granger, who walked half way across the floor before she stopped to exclaim:

"Why, Julien! What is the matter?"

He started, nearly dropped his brush, then smiled and laid aside both brush and palette.

"Oh, it's *you*. Come and sit down."

"But I'm disturbing you. I never saw you look so cross."

"If I looked cross it was before I saw you. That shows you were not to blame, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"I suppose it does." Millie shoved forward a camp-stool and established herself by his elbow. "But what in the world are you doing? Isn't that a l'Estrange?"

"Of course."

"And something has happened to it which you're trying to fix?"

"*C'est pas grave, mon amie*. I'm merely finding out that I can't paint."

"You don't mean that *you* scraped all that off?"

"That's nothing. It was a simple bit. My fingers are not so all thumbs that I can't restore that."

"But what did you do it for?"

"I wanted to find out how l'Estrange comes at his

effects. He doesn't seem to do anything extraordinary at all. They are merely there—simple, transparent, without any trickery. But of course I didn't dare dig into one of his really good bits."

"I think you are perfectly foolhardy, Julien, as it is. But you paint splendidly. Ma thinks so, too, and she's going to let me take lessons of you instead of down town. I told you that soap-girl would bring her around."

"That! I mean *vrai* art."

"I think," said Millie, "I like you better when you merely try to make something pretty. You're not so savage."

"Then stay just as you are for a minute. *Si'l vous plait*, don't move."

Hurriedly he reached for a drawing-board upon which a number of sheets had been fixed with thumb-tacks, found a bit of crayon and began sketching. In ten minutes there was another portrait, not humorous like the soap-girl study but much more tenderly sensitive in its expression.

"Oh, my!" cried the girl, clapping her hands. "It would do for dress-goods, furs, perfumery—something like that."

"If I were to try to color it I don't know where I'd

find the paint," Julien remarked reflectively. "But what do you mean by dress-goods and perfumery?"

"I was thinking of ads."

"What are ads? You know my English isn't very good."

"Advertisements, of course. In America we advertise everything almost with the picture of a girl. Why don't you try it? They pay immense prices."

"For such things?"

"Heaps and heaps. I've a friend in Washington Square, New York, and last year she made five thousand dollars just by furnishing wash-drawings for fashion-plates. But I suppose you'd think it beneath your dignity to work for money."

"Millie! If you only knew what it would mean to me—freedom, independence, to be able to get out of all this—this straining for the impossible, I mean. Yet doing ads might amount to the same thing in the end."

"How?"

"I might try and not succeed."

"It's not considered a crime in my country—trying."

"Would it really be worth while?"

He gave her a glance so direct and full of meaning that she colored and turned away, answering only after an interval:

"You brood too much. It's always worth while to try to amount to something. Come, do that sketch over in India ink, add a salad bowl and have me stirring it with a big spoon."

Deftly he re-made the drawing according to the new specifications, then washed in a bit of water-color.

"Voila!"

" 'Simpson's Scrumptious Salad Dressing!' It only lacks the caption," declared Millie with enthusiasm. "If you want to go at it seriously, I'll pose for you every day. Here, now. Imagine that this stick is a toothbrush and that there's a washbowl and mirror in front of me. See what you can do towards advertising 'Denton's Dental Delight.' Be sure to give me big, lovely white teeth, and take your time. I'll sell it for you for real money through my Washington Square friend."

The afternoon light was growing pale when the two went out, Millie laughing and chatting and even Julien in amazingly good spirits for a man who had so recently given evidence of being at the bottom of some somber and hidden Slough of Despond. Clara Hope, emerging from her place of concealment, found herself almost unable to stand, so benumbed was she from her long period of enforced movelessness. But what was she to think of Julien's explanation of the tamper-

ing which had been practiced upon l'Estrange's picture? Could he really have been trying merely to arrive at some technical secret? She could not believe it. His expression, his whole attitude had hinted at some much more desperate and emotion-stirring enterprise.

"And I don't even know that it was actually Julien who did the original damage," she said to herself as she walked slowly to the exit. "He may have been trying to cover up something done by somebody else. And now Millie has him in tow. I wonder what will come of it?"

Looking down over the balustrade in the corridor, she discovered that the pair had encountered Silva Jonquille, who, in an extravagantly lovely gown of dark blue silk covered with silver spangles, was seated in a niche beside a piece of statuary on the landing below. A few moments of casual conversation ensued, after which Millie proceeded on downstairs alone.

"Would you mind coming into the courtyard?" Silva's voice floated up. "I'm stifled in the house, and I want to talk with you."

Clara retreated to the studio and looked out upon the court referred to. The atmosphere was growing chilly. One must be indeed excited to feel stifled. More likely it was privacy rather than fresh air that

was being sought. But how was she to overhear the coming interview? The windows were too high from the ground to promise much, and she did not like to risk going to a lower floor and probably encountering somebody on the way. There remained the resource offered by a large tree, one limb of which brushed against the balcony before her. If she could venture out upon that——”

It seemed like a dizzy undertaking, especially with her muscles still in rebellious unsteadiness from the trial she had just gone through. Yet she ventured. And after one horrible moment of doubt, when it looked as if the feat could never be accomplished, she found herself crouching safely on the main branch and close to the quietly splashing fountain. Here, on a bench almost directly beneath her, Silva and Ferrard shortly seated themselves.

“Et maintenant?”

“It’s just this,” brought out Silva, in such vehement and rapid French that the listener could only follow her with difficulty. “Do you think you have the right to make love to an innocent young girl?”

“Love? She merely has posed for me once or twice and wants to take painting lessons.”

“Isn’t that enough?”

“Certainly, if you object. But I don’t like the

grounds you put it on. You speak as if I wasn't *fit* to make love to her."

"Are you?"

"Why not, apart from my being engaged to you?"

"And you can ask that!"

Silva sat silent for a moment, clutching her hands in her lap.

"If you only knew," she went on, finally, "how I tremble every time the doorbell rings, what agonizing nights I pass."

"I'm not very pleasantly situated, myself," returned Julien. "Millie is an escape. She helps me to forget that any of the horrible nightmare ever happened, that's all."

"It may be all now, but are you sure you mean nothing to her? Don't protest. It's so dreadfully natural in both of you. But a new love is impossible to one in your position. So I don't think it my duty to give you up, and I shan't."

"*Soit*. But you might as well accuse me of committing the murder and have done with it."

"Julien, I *know* you did it. Why do you avoid me and refuse to take me into your confidence? It makes no difference to me—nothing can."

Ferrard got up and walked moodily around the fountain, then slowly returned to his seat and said:

"I know, appearances are all against me. Still you might give me the benefit of the doubt."

"There is no doubt. That knife which the police found is the blade of my *miséricorde*."

"How do you know?"

Julien's voice showed sudden agitation, but Silva's reply was in a note of forced calm:

"La Haquenée recognized it and came to me to demand blackmail. That's why I have taken him into my service and am paying him until we can escape from France. What worries me is the hilt. Everybody would recognize that, and it's gone. The police haven't found it. Did you throw it away?"

"Silva, there's some dreadful mystery in this. I never touched your knife. I wasn't even at the ball."

"That's what you told l'Estrange at first."

"He said that, did he?"

"Naturally. He supposed that you'd make a clean breast of everything to me."

"And did he say that I was guilty?"

"No, he insisted that you were innocent, though he couldn't give any reason."

"Well, I can't give any reason, either—no proof, that is. But the story I told him first was true, the rest was a lie."

"You lied to him? Why?"

"I don't know. His incredulity frightened me, I think, and then it made me mad. So I made up a yarn, the most plausible one I could think of. He seemed to believe that."

"I'm sure he did. But Julien, you must tell me what really happened. Don't you see that your very life may depend upon my ability to help you?"

"L'Estrange has told you already, you say."

"Never mind—repeat it."

Ferrard looked around him as if to make certain that they were alone, and answered in a lowered voice:

"I went to Rougette's, just as I said I would. She laid out my costume for me and then offered me a drink of something. I woke up hours later without realizing at first that I had been asleep. The costume was gone. Rougette was gone. And looking at my watch I found that it was almost morning. The real murderer is the man she substituted for me and put into that Squid make-up."

"But Julien, what was her motive? You're making her an accomplice to her own murder. And you haven't accounted for my poignard—unless you had it with you."

"I tell you, I *never* had it with me. Where did you get the thing, anyway? I remember asking you once, and you wouldn't tell."

"It was from a man who used to love me—years ago. He also sent me the desk with the secret drawer to keep it in, together with a letter telling me that if I ever parted with it I would have bad luck. The next day he committed suicide."

"And you kept it?"

"Yes; I was superstitious, I suppose. For he stabbed himself, and the knife he did it with was never found. You must have read about it—it was called 'the phantom dagger case.' "

"I remember. He was supposed to have thrown it out of the window into a passing cart. But it couldn't have been your knife."

"No, I had that first. And yet, afterwards, when I went to look at it, there was fresh blood on it, though the blade was perfectly bright when it came."

"What nonsense! You imagined it."

"No, the blood was certainly there. No doubt I cut my finger without knowing it—I was so dreadfully upset."

"And yet you continued to keep it—even to show it, sometimes."

"Oh, it fascinated me after that. I often used to go and look to see if the blade was still clean. The impulse sometimes came over me even when I had company. My showing it then was a sort of bravado."

"I had no idea, Silva, that your nerves were in such a state."

"My dear, you don't know half. I even imagine sometimes that——"

Before she could say more, a pebble rattled across the brick pavement of the court. Clara, almost as startled as were the two by the fountain, thought at first that she herself must have dropped something. But there lay the pebble plainly in sight where it had stopped rolling, and fortunately nobody looked up

"It's as if there were ghosts in the house," Silva shuddered. "I feel them watching."

"That was no ghost," declared Ferrard getting to his feet. "Somebody threw a stone over the wall from the street, that's all. But it's getting late. Let's go in."

"Yes; there is something I was going to tell you, but it can wait. This is no longer a place for us to sit and talk."

Clara returned to the studio by the way she had come. So, the knife which had killed Rougette Picot belonged to Silva Jonquille, and had been kept in a secret nook to which Ferrard had access. Could any evidence be more damning? And he had not only been scheduled to play *The Squid* at the ball, but had told conflicting stories in one of which he admitted that he had gone there according to program. She had

but to report this interview to the chief of police, and the Law at least would be eternally satisfied.

Clara, however, was not satisfied at all. The chain of evidence was too perfect to be natural. What demon of ill-luck could have pursued a man that he would commit a murder with a marked knife, and not be able to call upon a single witness to support the alibi which he offered in defense? His fiancée, it is true, had accused him directly and to his face. But that proved nothing, and Silva herself needed much explaining. What was one to think of her with her wild talk about daggers which collected fresh blood-stains from distant suicides, her seemingly whole-hearted acceptance of a murderous lover, her avowed and unbounded jealousy?

Moreover, there was that pebble which had interrupted her in the midst of her talk. It had not been thrown from the street, as Julien suggested, but from the direction of the house. Clara had caught sight of it before it ceased to move. It rather looked as if her presence had been discovered and the pebble thrown as a warning.

It was perhaps half an hour later when—passing Silva's suite—she saw the door of the dressing-room open and her mistress standing upon the threshold in *grand dishabille*.

"Clara," she called, "do you know where Leontine is?"

"No, *madame*."

"Then you'll have to disturb Mrs. Granger. It's almost time for dinner and I must have somebody to help me with my hair."

"Can't you let me do it?"

"Certainly," answered Silva, "if you think you know how." And throwing herself into a low chair before the dressing-table, she added:

"Leontine oughtn't to leave me this way. She's becoming negligent—and I wanted to look my best tonight."

Clara plunged her fingers eagerly into that luxuriant, red-gold chevelure which she found before her, thankful of this unexpected opportunity of getting better acquainted. A woman having her hair done is proverbially loquacious and inclined to be off her guard, and this time there would be no interrupting pebbles.

"*Madame* has wonderful hair," she ventured. "I should think, though, it would make her head ache, there's so much of it."

"I have dreadful headaches," Silva admitted, "but I'm afraid they don't come from my hair."

"From sleeplessness, then?"

"More likely. I'm a wretched sleeper. And such dreams! Do you believe in dreams, child?"

"Oh, yes, *madame*. Those that we dream before midnight often come true. But they go by contraries if we dream them after."

And having thus adopted the superstitious attitude which might be expected of one in her supposed station, she added at random:

"Sometimes I can hardly tell what I dream from what really happens. They're so vivid, you know, especially the bad ones."

La Gadelle started violently, complained unjustly of the way in which the comb was being used, then broke out quite inconsistently into praise:

"I declare, my dear, you're an artist, in some ways better even than Leontine."

Adding at the end of a long scrutiny of her reflected image:

"Your ideas, though, are too much like Mrs. Granger's."

"What ideas, ma'am?"

"Don't you see? The work is very cleverly done, but my hair is too low in my neck. There is no effect of *bizarrerie*. I look so domestic that I hardly know myself."

"But, *madame*, it's so becoming. Unless you're go-

ing to *act* the vampire, what's the use trying to look like one?"

"*Plait-il?*"

"I mean," stammered Clara, abashed by her own boldness, "a little less extravagance might be a welcome change."

"Welcome to whom?"

"To anyone who might have grown tired of the bizarre."

"I don't suppose you mean to be impertinent?"

"Oh, no, ma'am! But I can't help having eyes."

"Evidently not. And no doubt everybody else has them, too. You've seen what he is doing in the studio—he and his new model. I'm forgetting myself, and before a servant. But I can't help it. Things are getting to be more than I can bear."

And throwing dignity to the winds, the Red Currant burst into tears.

Clara, to whom all display of emotion was usually hateful, felt a sudden pity for this proud beauty so evidently struggling in deep waters.

"*Madame* must not cry," she said softly. "It will spoil her eyes."

"You really want me to be pretty? I've fancied that you didn't quite like me."

"Perhaps I didn't until now."

"What reason have you to like me now?"

"I don't know. None, really. I just can't help it."

"Clara, you *are* a bit like Mrs. Granger. I almost hated her at first, she was so bent on depreciating any strangeness or originality—the very things I've been at such pains to cultivate. But I'm beginning to see—oh, why couldn't I have learned to know people of your sort sooner?"

"Anyway, you know her now."

"Too late—and it always was, I fancy. She has been telling me of my grandfather. He was a man I was never permitted to ask questions about when I was a child, yet I always felt just from seeing his picture that there was some affinity between us. I know now what it was."

"What?"

"He was insane."

"No—surely not that!"

"At least just as bad. If he wasn't a lunatic, he had to retire anyway to an institution to hide from public opinion. He died there. But some of his habits haven't yet been forgotten by the neighbors."

"May I ask what habits?"

"Monstrous ones. He was a doctor, and he loved they say to torture animals."

Clara reflected. A physician of irregular life and a

scientific bent, living in a country town, accused of vivisection and ending his days in a hospital for inebriates—that was probably the truth of the story.

“So I wouldn’t worry about it,” she declared, when she had sufficiently expounded her country-town theory.

“You’re certainly comforting,” said the other, drying her eyes, “though sometimes I don’t know whether I want to believe that I’m in my right mind or not.”

“What, ma’am?”

“Nothing. Don’t pay attention to what I say. Just bathe my face in rose water and put on a little powder, and I’ll leave the hair as it is—if that will please you.”

Clara reached to a row of cut-glass bottles standing upon the toilet-table, took up one labeled *Eau de Rose*, removed the stopper and gave the contents a preliminary shake. Her finger tip, coming in contact with the stuff, began to burn. A drop applied to her arm was like a tiny coal of fire, which left a bright red mark before she could wash it off.

“What is it?” asked Silva.

“I don’t know,” said Clara, sniffing cautiously at the bottle. “It smells like some kind of——”

“*Vitriol!*” cried the other, snatching the bottle from her hand.

She sank back, a trembling heap, into her chair,

and answered mechanically when Clara asked if she ordinarily kept any vitriol about:

"Yes, I suppose so. Everybody keeps it for cleaning brasses and such things."

"Then this bottle must have been filled up with it by mistake. You see it's partly rose water as it is."

"You're right. Of course, it must have been. But you nearly used it on my face. I'd have been disfigured for life."

"Never mind what might have happened. The mistake must have been made in the hurry while you were packing up to move."

"Then you don't think that anybody could have done it on purpose?"

"Why, no. How could anybody want to do such a dreadful thing?"

"Nobody could—no, not in my own house. But you don't know what a shock it has given me."

It was some time before Silva was able to go downstairs, and in the interval, what with the giving and receiving of consolation and encouragement, the mistress and the pretended servant became fast friends. Who could have foreseen that a new and dreadful tragedy was to spring—or at least to take its form—from the very closeness of their new relations?

CHAPTER IX

MORE VANDALISM

SILVA had said that only Julien knew the combination which would unlock the secret drawer where she had hidden her poignard, but of course the statement was not meant to be taken literally since it made no mention of Silva, herself. Nor was it possible any longer to ignore her in this connection. Her talk of dreams, of illusions, the disordered state of her nerves, introduced an incalculable element into her motives and conduct. And the more sympathetic Clara became the more anxious was she to settle once and for all the question of the jeweled hilt, which—notwithstanding the part it was supposed to have played in the murder—had so strangely failed to fall into the hands of the authorities. An hysterical subject, given to hallucinations, might have dropped it anywhere, or even be hiding it now in a place certain eventually to fall under enemy scrutiny.

That the Red Currant had enemies was only too evident after what had been found in the bottle of *Eau*

de Rose. It wasn't only the police that she had to fear, and a friend who wished to be a friend indeed would have to protect her even from her own blind impulses.

Why Clara had become such a friend she couldn't have said. Partially, no doubt, it was because of that very vitriol. Such a dastardly attack indicated that Silva, too, might be one of the objects of the unseen hatred, which, to Clara, surrounded the whole case as with a noxious vapor. Anyway, she didn't want to see her mistress fall a victim to any offensive launched in the dark, and as soon as the other members of the household were safely accounted for at or near the dining-table, she stole back to the scene of the hair-dressing, determined to give the suite a thorough search before any chance discovery should put events entirely beyond her control. Leontine, whatever had been the cause of her absence, was now back and helping for once in the kitchen. The field for the moment was clear.

Accurate observation soon becomes a habit even with the poorest detective, and with Clara it had long since risen to the height of a primary instinct. Quite unconsciously, while getting Silva ready for dinner, she had noted the exact position of innumerable objects ranging from pins to tables and chairs. She could, indeed,

have gone through the rooms, turning over everything in them, and have left no trace of her work discoverable even by a microscope. With surprise amounting almost to consternation, she was now made aware that in the brief interval of her absence some searcher whose technic was less perfect had been busy in the suite. There could be no manner of doubt about it. Wherever she turned her eyes they fell upon some small article which had been slightly but appreciably moved.

"I shall never be certain now," she sighed, shaking her head. "Even if I don't find it, that won't be any sign that it wasn't originally here."

Yet she pursued her search nevertheless, and did not abandon it till assured that the handle of the *Miséricorde* at least was at that moment nowhere in La Gadelle's private apartment. The important thing now was to discover if possible who else had been looking for it.

In the kitchen she found Leontine and La Haquenée working together with that air of wordless understanding which inevitably suggests an amorous relation. The apache was about to start for the dining-room with the desert. Leontine, instead of opening the door promptly before him, leaned and kissed him eagerly but silently on the mouth.

Clara retreated silently, and through another door

watched the completion of the family dinner. So this was the reason why the haughty lady's maid was willing to do general housework and to leave her own proper tasks to others! But where was Peters? It was strange that he should absent himself from the service of dinner.

Such conduct was partially explained, however, when the family rose from the table. Mrs. Granger, promptly taking charge of the clearing away, made it easy to understand how intolerable she must make things for a methodical and fastidious butler. Only her husband, looking more sheepish even than usual, was permitted really to help her. Millie and Ferrard, after a few half-hearted attempts to interfere, wandered off into another part of the house. They invited Silva to accompany them, but offered no very determined resistance to her obvious intention of being left behind.

La Gadelle, evidently, was not yet in perfect control of herself, for she walked nervously and aimlessly about the dining-room as if looking in vain for something to distract her thoughts. Taking advantage of a moment when she was alone, La Haquenée approached her, caught her hand and pressed it to his lips. The incident took place near the door behind which Clara was standing, and she heard him whisper in French:

“Something has happened to disturb you. What is it?”

“Nothing important, I guess,” answered Silva, with an amazing lack of resentment. “I’m tired.”

“All right. But if you won’t take me into your confidence, see that you don’t take anybody else.”

This scene, though it occupied only a few seconds, did not entirely escape notice, for Leontine, entering the room just at its close, had eyes blazing with sullen resentment; and the glance which she sent after her retiring mistress was heavy with hatred.

La Haquenée, turning towards her, muttered with a laugh:

“You little cat! Don’t you dare to show your claws around me.”

Whereupon the maid’s glance fell, as if a master had spoken.

Clara retired without being seen and after a time sought her own room. It was her habit now to make no sound unless there was some necessity for avoiding the appearance of stealth. Her door was ajar. She pushed it cautiously. There stood Peters before her dressing-table toying with a wrist watch which she had left off wearing because it seemed rather too elegant for her present part.

She had, as has already been noted, long since

arrived at the conclusion that the aloof and irreproachable butler had an Achilles' heel—a flaw in his armor. Outwardly glacial, he had, she believed, a profound inclination for the opposite sex, and she felt certain that any woman who cared to stoop to the risks of such a game could easily break through his reserve.

Hitherto she had scorned this means of working out a case. But since the disappearance of McClue a sense of desperation had been growing within her, making her reckless of what she did so long as she succeeded finally in sweeping away the web of intrigue in which she was caught. Justice had never a more ruthless emissary than this little ex-schoolmarm cut off from her moorings and compelled to make her way alone.

Peters' mood and inclination were not easily to be misunderstood. He found himself alone in a woman's room, and the situation, so insignificant in itself, evidently filled him with fancies. His glance roved about, as if peopling the empty space with figures which were not there. On seeing Clara he seemed to freeze all over.

"Eight forty-five," he muttered, comparing the wrist watch with a clock standing upon the mantel. "Seems to be right. And yet you are not down to dinner."

Clara dropped into a chair and let a tantalizing, incredulous smile curl the corners of her mouth.

"And I suppose you came here just for that—to see if my clock wasn't slow!"

"I knocked," he explained stiffly, "and you didn't answer. I didn't know but what you were ill."

"That would have ruined your life, eh?"

"Don't try to flirt with me," cried the butler with surprising vehemence, turning for the first time directly towards her.

Clara laughed, though she could not quite hide her amazement at his violence.

"Oh!" she brought out, with just a quiver of consternation. "Is that forbidden, then?"

"I always try to do my duty," he went on as if to himself. "But I'm a dangerous man when provoked. Haven't you seen how I've tried to avoid you from the first? There are some women I simply cannot endure. You are one of them."

"So terribly distasteful to you?" she dared to say.

"No, no. You understand what I mean. I'm giving a little treat to the servants tonight. It's time you were coming down."

There was something so real in his apparent struggle with himself, something so genuine and withal a little comic in his endeavor to keep the interview within con-

ventional lines, that Clara was half inclined to be sorry she had forced him to confession. Could it be true that he was one of those men whose conscience is forever at war with weakness? Or was this pretense of infatuation, of morbid susceptibility, merely a ruse to hide the real object of his visit?

The servants' treat, in any case, was no pretense, and on permitting Peters to conduct her to the lower floor she found Leontine and La Haquenée already waiting to do justice to a little feast which would have tempted an epicure.

"I prepared this while the family were being taken care of by that impossible Mrs. Granger," said the butler, a little pompously. "There is no need of our living like riff-raff just because they do."

The meal began stiffly. But as it progressed La Haquenée unburdened himself of a repertoire of boisterous songs, which he sung in a manner not to be despised, and Leontine—her bad humor evaporating—became loquacious, even witty. Clara did her best not to be conspicuous by her reserve, but was forced to wonder whether Peters had not staged the whole performance for the purpose of seeing his associates unbend. There was certainly a remarkable oiliness about his condescending affability, while his willingness to

open l'Estrange's best champagne appeared to be boundless. But if he expected to harvest a crop of indiscretions he was doomed to disappointment. The evening broke up without an important word having been said.

Clara had deviated from her usual custom in her search of Silva's apartment, and instead of being careful to leave no traces of her visit she had laid the train for a little explosion by wilfully deranging things—even going so far as to carry away Silva's spangled dress. The object, of course, was to see if any face would betray itself when complaints were made. But thus far there had been no complaint, and having made certain that her companions had all retired, she was left alone to decide whether or not there was any further object in keeping awake.

What chiefly inclined her not yet to call it a day was the fact that no ransacking of any apartment can be completed in its owner's absence. Silva might carry the hilt upon her person, and now would be a good time to find out. The borrowed dress suggested yet another idea. Why not wear it? If she were discovered she might be mistaken for her mistress, and there were several persons in that house whose attitude when they thought themselves alone with the Red Currant might be worth study.

So she crowded herself as best she could into the gown, more than a shade too tight for her, covered her tell-tale brown hair with a highly colored wig taken from beneath the double bottom of her seemingly so innocent little trunk, and sauntered out into the vastness of the slumbering mansion—not having forgotten to slip an electric torch and an automatic pistol into an open bag which she wore at her belt.

No house is totally dark in its interior even at night, for the rays creeping in at the windows are reflected from surface to surface and dispersed into a sort of phosphorescence rather than actually lost. But the corridors were very dim and the mansion, built of age-old stone, had about it none of the creaking noises common to modern and less well-constructed dwellings. The silence, indeed, was like that which must reign in a cemetery vault when those who have laid away the last of its destined sleepers have gone and sealed the door forever behind them—a dreadful silence, which permitted the circulation of the blood about the ears to be heard with startling distinctness. Even the soft clicking made by the torch and the pistol as they stirred together in the bag seemed in that dead and moveless air to be magnified until it was like the crashing of cymbals. It was necessary to pause and wrap a handkerchief about the torch to preserve the peace. Only

then was her flitting sufficiently ghost-like to be in harmony with her surroundings.

Clara always remembered that night as an occasion of premature premonitions. Not but what it was eventful enough in its way, but its happenings had little in common with the vague dread which was haunting her imagination. And when the dreadful did occur it was bright day and cheerful, with no forewarning of tragedy whatever; while the most dreadful thing of all did not happen there but many, many miles away. Life is so woven together that we cannot fail sometimes to catch glimpses of the future in the design of the present, but almost invariably our imaginations distort them so that when the prophecy is fulfilled it escapes recognition.

Thus Clara, standing there in the silence, was conscious of a half-formed expectancy that it would be broken the next instant by some appalling clamor. Instead, there came only a faint creaking, hardly audible though sufficiently significant. Someone was ascending the grand staircase at the head of which she had come to a pause.

Breathlessly she stepped back of a bit of statuary, and soon became aware of a dimly visible form stealing past. It reached the vicinity of Silva's suite, then vanished as completely as if the walls had opened and

swallowed it up. But she knew that the prowler had merely passed into the shadows of the deep recess of one of the doors. There was the faint grating of metal upon metal, as of a key cautiously thrust into a lock, followed by the appearance of a rectangle of pale gray as the door slowly opened and threw a human figure into comparatively sharp relief. She saw now that she was trailing a man. But was she on the track of crime or merely scandal?

Not scandal, surely, for the door was left half open, and only burglars and their ilk are so careful of the way of retreat.

She dropped to her hands and knees and literally crawled over the threshold, knowing that it was darkest near the floor and that even the most watchful are observant chiefly of what goes on at the level of their own eyes. It was a room furnished in white enamel, with heavy curtains partially drawn over the windows. Nothing stirred, yet it was some moments before she could assure herself that the room was actually empty.

In the room adjoining, to which she cautiously proceeded, she was met again by the moveless outlines of tables and chairs, the pale wraith of herself reflected by the mirror before which she had so lately dressed her mistress's hair being the only visible sign of animate existence. The door into the corridor was locked.

Clearly the unknown had passed into Silva's bed-chamber.

But this room also was empty, save for its lawful occupant. A night light was burning, and Silva could be clearly seen, fast asleep. Clara drew near the bed, stooped and thrust her hand very slowly beneath the pillow. People who carry objects about with them for safe-keeping are almost certain to put them under their pillows at nights. But results were negative, and an inspection of the lately discarded garments yielded nothing.

Not until she had made certain of this did Clara remember that the bedroom was the last of the suite. The creature she had traced there could not have gone any farther in this direction, and here, too, the door was locked. What could have become of him?

She retraced her steps to the first room she had entered. The door—yes, it was now locked as tight as the others. She was caught in the suite as in a trap, and Silva—as if moved by a tardily penetrating sense of strange presences—could be heard stirring. The window, then!

Luckily it was already open, and Clara reached the balcony just as Silva switched on all the lights. The retreat was now far from safe, and crowding into the

shadow cast by one of the half-drawn curtains, Clara was forced against the railing. Instinctively she looked down. There was a man standing upon the railing of one of the balconies on the floor below.

As she watched, he caught hold of the vines which curtained the house front and began to climb, as nimble as a monkey, hand over hand. A light wind had risen, and the rustle of the trees drowned the complaint of the tortured creepers, so that the fellow seemed to have no weight and to move without a sound. A sense of unreality oppressed her as she saw him gain the level of the mansard and disappear into the great atelier above.

Evidently she had no longer to do with the first prowler. He had been rather slender, while this one was large, stout and clumsy looking, notwithstanding his strength. Should she attempt to duplicate his feat and follow him, or take hold of the vines and simply slide to the ground? Climbing promised better. It would not have been so very difficult, either, had it not been for the spangled dress which impeded her every movement and made her glad enough when she could finally reach out and grasp the stone bracket of the next balcony above. After that the going was still worse, but she found herself before an unfastened

window at last and literally tumbled in upon the studio floor, painfully aware that for several minutes she would be almost helpless from exhaustion.

Before her, but fortunately at some little distance and with his back turned, stood a figure dressed in corduroy with a blue flannel shirt of the sort affected by workmen and the humbler sort of artists. His hair, showing from beneath a soft felt hat, was long and unkempt, and when he turned she saw that his beard was not only long but covered more than half of his face. Still he did not appear to have noticed her, his attention being fixed upon the pictures before which he soon began to pace, moving back and forth along the walls with a wild, unsteady step and muttering imprecations.

Suddenly he drew a knife—no jeweled *miséricorde*, but a common butcher-knife such as might be snatched from any public kitchen. The rays from half a dozen unshaded windows left no doubt as to the weapon. Had he gone completely mad? Apparently. For having paused for an instant before a particularly beautiful figure-study, he fell upon it as if it had been a living enemy, and before Clara could fully realize what he was about, had reduced the canvas to shreds.

Such wanton destruction was not to be endured, and

as he moved as if to repeat his vandalism upon another subject, she cried out:

"Tiens! No more of that."

At the sound of this unexpected interruption, the *misérable* turned, only to find himself blinded by the flash of a pocket torch.

"Diable! Who are you?" he demanded in very good French.

"Never mind who I am," responded Clara in the same tongue. "Drop that knife. Are you such a coward that you have to vent your spite upon helpless pictures?"

"Perhaps," answered the other, making no effort to hide his face but still retaining hold of the knife. "I don't care what I am. I don't care for anything, do you understand?"

"I don't. But I can see that you are drunk."

"Think so if you like, but stop blinding me with that light. I don't want to see who you are, I only want to finish what I came here for. If you try to stop me——"

"Indeed, you shan't!" Clara stepped forward with her automatic leveled. "Drop that knife or I'll have to break your arm with a bullet. I am going to fire, do you hear? And I never miss, I assure you. I——"

She choked without achieving her sentence. A

handkerchief had been drawn over her mouth. Arms pinioned her from behind. And while she struggled, helpless in the clutches of this new and unforeseen assailant, the picture-destroyer dashed out through a window, leaving her staring up into a pair of mocking eyes that looked down over her shoulder.

"*Cent pipes de diables!* If it isn't the *domestique*," exclaimed a voice in the accents of Montmartre as she felt herself released.

"La Haquenée!" countered Clara, turning her flash. "Do you know what you have done, or did you do it on purpose?"

"That's a good one! I catch the *bonne à tout faire* with a pocket flash and a gun in the patron's studio at two o'clock in the morning, and she asks me what I've done. What have *you* been doing, Miss Clara Whatsyername?"

"There was a man here," Clara responded, recovering her ordinary tone. "He started to cut the paintings to pieces, and you have let him get away."

"*Un gaffe, alors.* My mistake and your treat."

He walked over to the ruined canvas, and by the help of the cone of light which Clara threw after him, examined it attentively.

"This is a rum go," he muttered. "But why did

you butt in on it? Are you a night watchman, or just a flic's moll?"

"I'm a housemaid who doesn't like to see things destroyed by a lunatic."

"Yes, you are!"

"And you throttled me," she persisted. "If it wasn't to help a pal escape, what then? Did you think I was somebody else?"

"*Mein?*"

"That's it. I'm wearing a borrowed dress and a wig. You thought I was Silva Jonquille—with *M'sieu* Ferrard. No wonder you were furious."

Haquenée took a step forward, and halted only at a warning gesture from the pistol.

"What put that into your bean?"

"Just a notion. You must have jumped to very distasteful conclusions."

"*Coquine!* A little more of that, and I'll finish with you."

"I hardly think so."

"On account of your little plaything? Poof!"

As he spoke his foot shot out, sending Clara's automatic into a corner. She jumped back, and by the time he had regained his poise stood covering him with a second weapon which she had snatched from the bosom of her dress.

With an exaggerated bow, La Haquenée waved her to a camp stool and drew up another for himself.

"A professional flic and no mistake," he chuckled. "I only wanted to make sure. Look here, are you from the *boîte*?"

"The what?"

"Are you a regular, or just trying to get somebody to sing a little song of your own?"

"Sing?"

"Yes, through the nose—*le chantage*, blackmail—use what word you like."

"But whom could I be trying to make sing in a house like this?"

"That's what I'm going to find out."

"Really, Haquenée, it isn't the one you are interested in."

"How do you know who I'm interested in?"

"I've watched you. And it isn't Leontine, as you pretend and as it naturally might be expected to be. It's Silva Jonquille."

"Well?"

"Simply this. I want to be her friend, too."

"Prove it, little one."

"How?"

"By telling what you know and what you're here for, posing as a servant."

"And if I do?"

"If it sounds right, I'll keep my mouth shut about tonight. That's something, ain't it?"

"Why, yes; I don't want to lose my place."

"Very well; if I find I like your game, you can go on with it. *Chacun peut piger son rat*, that's my motto. Live and let live."

"And on my side, I suppose, I'm to say nothing about your ability to use your feet—so remarkably like an *apache*?"

"Bah! I'm no longer in the *actif*. Do as you like. Anybody's welcome to that little *histoire*. Shoot your piece."

"It's a bargain," said Clara after a moment's reflection. "Keep still about tonight and so will I."

"Not enough. *Jaspinez* a bit about what's under your top-knot."

"There isn't much—yet. But I can tell you one thing. This afternoon, and again tonight, somebody was searching her room for the——"

"*Chut!* How do we know there ain't an ear at the keyhole? This isn't the place to give names to things, since you know so much. This afternoon, you say?"

"And tonight."

"No matter about tonight. That was me. And you, I gather, are the little mouse that I locked in?"

"But how did you manage it?"

"Easy enough. Heard I was followed, took all the keys, crawled past you in the dark and went out by the window—just as you did."

"Then Silva must be locked in now. She'll raise an alarm."

"No, I stopped and explained things to her just now as I was climbing up. She was on the balcony."

"You told her you thought it was I?"

"Not a bit of it. Had no idea it was you then."

"Whom did you think it was?"

"Not so fast, *p'tite*. There's got to be more lime on the twig—enough to hold us both. Tell me what you're up to."

In obedience to a sudden resolution, Clara hurried back to her room and returned with her credentials.

"I'm working for McClue," she explained, as she thrust them into his hands, "and he is after big game—big game only. I think he mentioned you to me once."

"Never heard of him," snapped the apache, running his eyes over the papers which he could only half understand. "But if these are genuine, you're a fool to pack 'em around."

"I don't think so. If one is suspected the game is up anyway, and it is often well to have your true identity

within reach. As to Mr. McClue, he calls himself Lepadou over here."

"Lepadou! I remember. He ran me in at the time of the Boncœur affair, but treated me like a gentleman afterwards. Big game—*the big game*. Yes, that was his lay."

"Then," said Clara, "in so far as this is an affair between the Red Currant and an artists' model it isn't to my interest to interfere. But if you tell Silva who I am——"

"Not likely. She'd run away at once with a yellow dog."

"Ferrard?"

"You're good at names, Miss."

"Then let me stay. He may be something in my line."

"Little one, I shan't interfere with you at all. Is there anything else I can do besides playing *l'aveugle*?"

His whole manner had changed, and an amiable grin broadened across his face.

"You don't seem to like yellow dogs," remarked Clara, regarding him.

"Right."

"Because they sometimes follow big game?"

"Oh, I'm not bothering about *your* big game. All I want is to keep the flat-feet off the currant bush."

"You mean that my being here makes the police think that they're already sufficiently represented?"

"You get me like a shot. A common *agent en bourgeois* would go for the bush. Lepadou bothers only with trees."

"But you admit that there may be a tree?"

"I don't know anything about that, lady. Since you're here, it looks like it. But Silva is only a little red currant. If I help you, will you promise to help her, even if——"

"Well?"

"Look here. As you say, it's nothing to Lepadou if one woman wants to score off of another."

"Are you sure she scored, Haquenée?"

"No; but if you thought she did?"

"In that case I'd think I'd made a mistake in coming, and should go away."

"Just so—and leave her to the flatties."

"Not even that. I'll tip you off if I find them growing warm. Should you see me brushing my hair with two fingers——"

"Good! It will mean that the Red Currant is in danger."

"Yes—or that you are."

"*Par exemple!* I didn't do this job and can take

care of myself. But it's understood. You're a *zig*. Shall we adjourn?"

"Tell me first who it was that you just let escape."

"I didn't really see him, *p'tite*. Had Ferrard on my mind. How'd he look?"

Clara described the vandal's appearance as best she could. Haquenée remained silent for several minutes.

"I think I know him," he brought out finally. "A queer dick, and I've thought for some time that he was up to something. But I don't get his slashing the picture."

"Never mind that. What's his name?"

"Flamand Bec. He hangs around the *quartier* drinking absinthe. It goes to his head sometimes and makes him fight like a gorilla. That's all I've got to say now—and *pas des tromps*. Try to double-cross me and—good-bye *casseroles*!"

The apache accompanied the threat with a suggestive pass of his hand across Clara's throat, and was gone.

CHAPTER X

THE FATE OF AN INFORMER

AFTER what had been discovered in the bottle of *Eau de Rose*, Clara was not surprised to find herself installed as Silva's regular maid.

"I know it was merely carelessness, if she was responsible at all," the mistress went to the trouble to explain. "But one can't take chances with vitriol, and it makes me uneasy now to have Leontine near me."

Clara pretended to take the explanation at its face value, giving no hint that she knew of any reason why her predecessor in office should be suspected of intentionally misfilling the bottle. Yet Silva must have observed how Leontine followed La Haquenée about, just as she must be aware of the apache's unservant-like feeling for herself. There was evidence, indeed, that day by day, with Ferrard drifting further and further in Millie Granger's direction, the apache's devotion—so to call it—was becoming more bold and less at pains to hide itself.

But the Red Currant, instead of allowing any of these circumstances to disturb her, appeared to be growing calmer. She spent much time in the motherly company of Mrs. Granger, and was either acquiring increased powers of self-control or actually finding something very like happiness in her new surroundings. Whether this, if it was genuine at all, came from growing slowly reconciled to the threatened loss of the last shreds of her influence over Julien, or from unselfish satisfaction in the continued absence of any hue and cry against him, it was impossible to say. Apart from her sudden preference for Clara, she gave no sign of having especial need either for forgetfulness or courage.

Leontine was even a greater enigma. Her calm acceptance of a change which turned her from a privileged companion into a maid of general housework might be accounted for by the fact that she was now freer to consort with La Haquenée. But there were details of her conduct not so easily explained. For one thing, she was frequently missing altogether.

These absences were cleverly timed, and cloaked by all sorts of expedients; but it was nevertheless evident that her interests were no longer entirely confined to the house.

Clara had been looking for just this sort of evidence

that the big mystery which had brought her to Europe was involved with the lesser one she had set herself officially to investigate. Heretofore, nobody beneath that roof had fit conclusively into what she felt to be a missing rôle. Leontine, however, from the moment that her time was not fully to be accounted for, could be cast with some confidence as a possible go-between. Here at last were palpable, physical means whereby The Squid might have a living feeler within the mansion.

It was therefore with more than casual interest that Clara, one evening just after dinner, caught sight of her new suspect standing bareheaded by the front gate and looking out through its bars with a display of languid indifference towards the thin stream of passers-by too exaggerated not to be assumed. To judge by superficial appearances, no thought was further from her mind than that of leaving the courtyard. The next instant, having cast a furtive look over her shoulder, she opened the gate a few inches and darted out of sight.

Clara lost no time in taking up the pursuit, and soon had a glimpse of her quarry crossing the boulevard more than half a block away—and now wearing a tiny turban which she must have had concealed about her from the start.

From this point on Leontine proceeded slowly, pausing at every corner to look back. But Clara was a good *limnier*, and was always behind a tree or hidden by the glare of a street lamp whenever the critical moment arrived. Few people realize the effectiveness of street-lamps as cover, or how little those regularly spaced zones of illumination in the pedestrian's wake can be trusted to conceal nothing behind them.

At Place St. Germain, Leontine faced about and began retracing her steps, an ancient trick the very simplicity of which has disconcerted many a careless trailer. But Clara had noted every possible nook of concealment on the way, and was able to dart behind one of those cylindrical billboards so common in Paris streets and to keep on the farther side of it until the risk of immediate discovery was passed.

This time the quarry turned off into the Rue St. Andre d'Arts, then doubled back in her original direction, which was towards the Boulevard St. Michel. It was now possible to hazard a guess as to her destination. She was going to the police.

Leontine, take care! For you the police may be more dangerous than all the Squids in the world. It would be safer to kill Silva Jonquille with your own

hands than to betray her to the authorities, if that's what your plan is. Have you forgotten what the apaches do to traitors?

With thoughts like these passing through her mind, Clara abandoned the direct chase altogether, ran through the Rue Grands Augustins and turned to the right at Pont Neuf. In due season Leontine reappeared, passing beneath arc light of the St. Michel quarter, and was lost to sight among the shadows of the Quai d'Orfèvres. Nobody needs to be very familiar with Paris to know that the Quai d'Orfèvres gives upon the headquarters of the *Police Judiciaire*. She was going to visit Chief Balai.

Clara sat down on a wayside *banc*—one of those straight-backed, double-faced benches which add so much to that fictitious air of leisure which the French capital continually displays in spite of all its rush and turmoil. It was humiliating to think that Balai had made a fool of her and had had another agent on the ground perhaps from the very first. What would Judge Tardieu, with his anxiety to ward off ill-considered action, say to this?

It might be a good idea to find out. Here was the *Palais de Justice* almost in front of her, with a single lighted window high up in its stately façade. The

judge had told her where to find him, and that he often worked in the evening. It was more than possible that the light was his.

The crowds which throng this home of the criminal courts during the day, giving it an air of mock and terrible gayety, were long since gone, the great stairway beyond the ornate Napoleonic grill-work completely deserted. Yet one of the gates was ajar, and she was soon standing before a bored-looking huissier, the sole being on guard. He received her without even looking up from his seat, announcing in the midst of peaceful puffs from his pipe that her idea of getting an audience with any one of the judiciary at such an hour was preposterous.

"If you'd take my card in instead of sitting there and staring at it," cried Clara impatiently, "you'd soon see that it's you who are preposterous."

The huissier started. Officers of the court are not accustomed to be addressed in this fashion—not in Europe—and he was prepared to assert his dignity. But, observing that the person with whom he had to deal was obviously none of those pathetic relatives who were always bothering him for news of some defendant or other, he exchanged his frown for an insinuating grin.

"If *m'sieu le juge d'instruction* was only expecting you, now——"

"He'll be expecting me as soon as you let him know I am here," Clara cut him short. "Don't tell me he has gone home, either, for I saw a light in his window."

"*Pardon!* If *mamzelle* is his friend, if she knows his window——"

Clara stamped her foot in vexation at this unexpected result of her lucky guess. But the official had departed on his errand, returning shortly with the tinge of mockery more in evidence in his manner than ever.

"*M'sieu le juge se trouve très occupé, mais——*"

"But he'll see me nevertheless."

"Exactly what I was going to remark."

"Then be good enough to lead the way. I'm only familiar with this place from hearsay."

"There's lots that would like to say as much," the *huissier* suggested. "And now if you'll give yourself the trouble to follow me——"

He mounted several flights of stairs, threaded long and intricate passages and finally opened a door into a large, square and singularly cheerless cubicle where sat the judge behind a desk upon a small raised platform.

"That man was impertinent enough *when he began,*"

said Clara, taking the chair reserved for accused persons as the huissier withdrew. "And after he had seen you he was *worse*."

"Which proves that you're not the only one with finesse," smiled Tardieu.

"What do you mean?"

"That it seemed best to let him go on thinking that your visit wasn't official."

"Oh! Then you *are* subtile—and quite right. Perhaps I oughtn't to have come."

But, relieved at being able at last to share her responsibilities, Clara went on to explain the object of her visit, telling how she had followed Leontine to the quai, of the vitriol, of Julien's attentions to Millie and of the change that had of late come over Silva Jonquille. She related, too, what she had seen in the studio, in the garden; and how La Haquenée continued to follow his mistress about with his eyes, but less and less like a faithful dog and more and more like a hunter.

"She's losing her ascendancy over him," muttered the judge. "I didn't know what to think of his being there when you first wrote me about it, but her statement to Julien makes it only too plain. And now the maid is jealous—which perhaps accounts for the vitriol. You'll have to watch over Silva carefully, Miss Hope."

"I think I can protect her, *m'sieu le juge*—from everybody, that is, but herself."

"Why do you put it like that?"

"Because she talks so strangely sometimes."

"You suspect her?"

"No, but I could never explain her—to Balai, for instance."

"Let's hope you won't have to. And now about the pictures. Ferrard may have been telling the truth when he said he was looking for technical secrets, but that doesn't account for this man, Bec. The length to which art feuds are sometimes carried in Paris passes belief. It may be something of that sort. But I wish I had known. I'd have told l'Estrange about it."

"What, you've seen him?"

"Yes, he stopped to have a word with me the other evening. He was on his way to England, where he has been suddenly called on some business connected with the Tait gallery."

"The other evening—*what* evening?" demanded Clara with signs of growing excitement.

"It was last Tuesday."

"Are you sure? At what time?"

"About nine o'clock. But——"

"Can't you fix it more exactly?"

"Why, yes. He arrived at about eight forty-five,

and having to catch a train left on the stroke of the hour."

Clara sighed and sank back into her seat.

"There goes one possibility up in smoke. Peters, the butler, was with me at the stroke of nine, and for fully fifteen minutes before."

"Peters?" Tardieu regarded his protégé for a moment in mute astonishment. "I see. You began by simply thinking that he might not be Peters, and ended by—but did you make sure that your watch was right?"

"Yes, I compared it with several clocks in the house that night, and with the chronometer in a *horlogerie* the next morning. I'm 9:15 now. What are you?"

"It's no use, Miss Hope," said the judge with a smile, taking out his watch. "I've one of those provoking timepieces which never gives me an excuse either to be late at an appointment or to pretend that the other party is. Just 9:15, as you can see for yourself. But you make me half afraid of you."

"Why? I'd never seen l'Estrange and Peters together. How could I know they weren't the same man?"

"You couldn't. But if you're going to insist on certainties, how do you know that anybody is not The Squid?"

There was something so comically innocent about the question that Clara burst into laughter. But once in the street again she grew thoughtful. What a horrible world it was. She couldn't be certain, in fact.

The next morning the world seemed determined to shake off this incubus of general suspicion. To begin with, it was one of those wonderful spring days, bright and warm, which make it appear as if the season had advanced a full month over night. In that sparkling sunshine, doubts shrank to more normal proportions.

And shortly before noon, who should call but the Duchess of Fayves. Peters himself let her in. Clara overheard the two exchange a few words of greeting. Her ladyship called him by name.

"Here's another of my guns spiked," laughed Clara under her breath. "They are old acquaintances, so Peters must be just Peters after all. And I'm disappointed. This business makes one a beast."

In the afternoon there rose again the question of Leontine's whereabouts.

"I don't know what to make of that girl," said Peters anxiously, meeting Clara in one of the halls. "She's always prowling around the house and never anywhere

when wanted. It's a queer house, too, since *M'sieu l'Estrange* is no longer here."

"Queer?"

"Maybe that's too strong a word. But I don't know anything about our employers, really. Supposing something should go wrong."

"Wrong?" Once more she repeated his word, surprised at this new point of view.

The butler continued:

"A theft, for instance. I'm only warning you not to imitate a bad example. A servant can't be too careful to avoid suspicious conduct, especially when working for people of a doubtful character."

Clara made an excuse to get away, for she began to have an idea that Peters was merely taking advantage of an opportunity to make up to her, and she did not feel in the mood to endure him. Opposite Leontine's door she paused. The door was closed, locked, the key on the inside. She knocked. There was no response. Leontine, then, seemed not be absent but hiding. Hiding from what?

Returning to the lower part of the house, she found La Haquenée sprawled upon one of the seats in the entry, sleeping—a sleep almost too profound to be real.

Clara went out into the garden. Not even sunshine

could make the interior of the l'Estrange mansion long seem wholesome and reassuring. The garden was cheerful with the chirping of sparrows. This was more as it should be. Nature, at least, was open and above board. But she had no sooner reached the gate than she stopped with an exclamation of startled indignation. There, just outside and hidden from the house by the massive stone gate-post, stood the huissier.

Could it be possible that he had the audacity to pursue her? But no. Someone must have given him her address, and that could only have been Tardieu. There was something serious behind this visit.

"I was waiting for a chance to get a glimpse of you," he said as she again approached him. "The judge wants to see you. Do you think you can get away?"

"I'm already away," she answered, stepping through the gate.

"Well, then, the judge is waiting on a *banc* along the Boulevard St. Michel just opposite the Café de la Source."

"On a bench along the boulevard—Judge Tardieu?"

"Yes, Miss," the huissier grinned. "His Honor thought you might not like to come to the *bureau* again. But I know he's in a hurry. I wouldn't keep him waiting if I was you."

Wearing a servant's apron, her social inconsequence

now revealed, it was impossible to preserve even a shred of dignity in the eyes of this incorrigible messenger. But Clara was too impressed with the importance of his message to care very much about anything else. And promising to lose no time, she started away—after snatching off her cap and wrapping it into a neat bundle with her apron.

The judge was on the spot indicated.

“Have you seen the newspapers?” he demanded, hardly waiting for her to sit down.

“I saw *Le Matin*.”

“It wasn’t in *Le Matin*. You should have read *Le Figaro*.”

“What would I have found there? No bad news, I hope?”

“A notice to the effect that l’Estrange’s ‘The Struggle of Innocence’ has been withdrawn from public view sooner than was expected in order to enable its purchaser to ship it at once to America.”

Clara looked blank.

“Even if it’s true——”

“It isn’t true, Miss Hope. The notice is part of the usual silly police moves to keep a scandal secret until it explodes.”

“What is true, then?”

"The picture is missing."

"Stolen?"

"Presumably so. It disappeared sometime between the closing of the gallery last night and the opening hour this morning. I'm beginning to think you're right about l'Estrange being the real object of attack in all this."

"There's certainly an attack being made on his pictures," said Clara after reflection.

"More than his pictures this time," declared the judge. "Don't you see? Silva Jonquille is his weak point—as she is perhaps mine."

"You think l'Estrange is in love with her?"

"He's very much interested, anyway. And if he has made an enemy——"

"Of whom?"

"I haven't the least idea. But let us assume that it's somebody with considerable power and influence. The supposition is not difficult of a man who is both fearless and energetic. What more natural, then, than an attempt to reach him through Silva?"

Clara, remembering what she had already been made to suffer through the disappearance of McClue, was unable to repress a shiver. None knew better than she the terrible power of human malignancy when once the heart has provided it with hostages. But she

couldn't exactly see how the disappearance of 'The Struggle of Innocence' brought La Gadelle into jeopardy.

"I'll show you, then," said Tardieu when she had explained her difficulty. "Let us suppose that everything which has happened to the pictures is a blind—this last incident will nevertheless make a great noise. Balai, if he isn't already more than willing, will be almost forced into making an investigation. And if the least hint gets out of any injury having befallen the pictures in the house——"

"I see," interrupted Clara. "Balai can then advance under cover of an apparently friendly purpose. But no hint shall get out if I can help it. I've already hidden that one canvas that was ruined. It's between the mattresses of my own bed, and I don't think that anybody but La Haquenée knows about it. Have you tried to locate Bec?"

"Yes, he was seen today in his usual haunts and will be watched from now on."

"But you don't know what he was doing last night?"

"Unfortunately, no. We didn't pick up his trail in time. But what I'm afraid of is that l'Estrange will hear of what has happened and come blundering into the thick of things."

“Still, if there is nothing out of the way to be found in his house——”

“How do we know what is to be found there—now? Silva is already implicated through what we know of her *miséricorde*. And what has become of its jeweled handle? It seems to me that nothing would be easier than to make it appear that l’Estrange had opened his place to a gang of murderers, and to arrest one or more of them on the premises.”

Clara was forced to admit such a possibility, but went no further than that. Her mind kept reverting as usual to The Squid, and for once this very nightmare stood in the way of her fears. For how could The Squid have to do with a man like l’Estrange, or indeed with any man at all. The Squid’s victims were invariably women.

She started back towards the St. Germain quarter, therefore, less apprehensive of an imminent crisis than was Judge Tardieu, whom she left silently brooding on his *banc*. The greater was her surprise when, on nearing her destination, she found the boulevard nearly blocked by a crowd of that unmistakable sort which collects about the scenes of accidents and other calamities.

“Hey, where are you going?” demanded a police-

man as she tried to pass through the l'Estrange gateway.

"But I belong to the house."

"All right then, go ahead—you'll find it easier to get in than to get out."

"What has happened?" she demanded, having reached the front steps where lolled La Haquenée in an attitude of perfect indifference and repose.

"Perquisition from the *boîte*," he answered, carelessly lighting a cigarette.

"The chief of police with a search warrant, you mean?"

"Don't know anything about any warrant. He asked if he could come in and look at the pictures, so maybe it's only a social call."

"Haquenée, that's only a pretense. He's after—you know what."

"*Bien probable*. And if he finds it there it won't do no great harm to *my* feelings."

"He may find it somewhere else."

"What? Isn't this your picinc? Don't you know where it is?"

"It's certainly not my picnic, and I haven't the least idea in the world."

"That's different again." The apache's eyes nar-

owed. "I begin to smell a rat—and not for the first time."

"Have you seen Leontine?" Clara suddenly thought to ask.

"Leontine? Oh, she's *out* again, I believe."

"Maybe it is just as well for her that you *do* believe it," Clara reflected. Indeed the words were on the tip of her tongue. But she went on into the house without suffering one of them to fall.

Her first move was to assure herself that Leontine was still in her room. There seemed to be no doubt about it, as the door was as before, the key on the inside of the lock. Then she hurried towards the studio, near the entrance to which she caught sight of Millie Granger crouching on the floor, her ear against a panel and tears streaming down her cheeks.

"They won't let me in!" cried the girl, starting up. "Can't you do something? They are torturing him with ridiculous questions. I want to be with him. What does it all mean? Nobody has any right to keep me out."

That awe of officialdom which centuries of strong government has stamped upon nearly every soul in Europe was singularly lacking in Millie, yet her fresh young face had become pathetically older and care-

worn. Clara, forgetting for a moment her rôle, gathered her frankly into her arms.

"I don't know what it means, girly. They have come to take an inventory, I hear. Try not to worry and maybe they'll soon be gone."

"But they're not talking about the pictures any more," Millie insisted. "It's about a fancy knife handle, and about that girl who was stabbed at the *bal des Tapettes*. What can Julien possibly know of such things?"

Clara shook her head. Could it be that Balai had stumbled upon that dreadfully clear case against Ferrard with which she could so easily have furnished him—the case she had mistrusted because of its sheer completeness? It didn't seem likely. La Haquenée, who doubtless was in a position to have discovered—or even to invent—a number of damning facts, would be the last man to seek revenge through the police. Ferrard, himself, couldn't have been such a fool as to talk. And Leontine was eager only to ruin Silva. Balai, then, had no information and was probably indulging merely in a little third degree work, hoping to find some excuse for extending his investigations.

"If there's anybody in danger," Clara said aloud, "it can't be Mr. Ferrard."

And the next instant, as if on purpose to contradict

her, the door opened and out came a uniformed officer with Julien walking beside him—handcuffed.

Millie gave a shrill cry and threw herself upon her lover as though to tear him away from his captor by force. Clara, scarcely less surprised, slipped forward in time to intercept the chief and to motion him back into the studio.

“Please wait just a minute,” she begged, shutting the door behind her. “Can’t you countermand your orders and listen to my report before taking any further steps?”

“They won’t leave the house till I do,” was Balai’s dry rejoinder. “But is it possible that you think of making a report?—of taking *me* into your confidence? I’m not Judge Tardieu, you know.”

“Confidence?” cried Clara, sitting down and waiting till the other had followed her example. “You talk of confidence, after hiring the first jealous lady’s maid that comes along to take my place and practically supersede me in the case?”

“I’m glad you’ve discovered *something*, Miss Hope. I had to have some means of finding out what was going on, and this jealous lady’s maid, as you call her, didn’t come to me until after it was clear that I’d never learn anything from you.”

“Yet she did come?”

"There's no particular need to deny it, since you know."

"Then why don't you follow up her tip?"

"Which was?"

"Which was—if it was anything—to search Miss Jonquille's room for the missing dagger-hilt."

"Pardon me, I've received no such tip. Leontine has been less brilliant than you seem to imagine. She has, she tells me, been looking for the hilt but without being able to find it."

"I don't understand, then, what you came for. Surely it wasn't to look at some pictures."

"Your insight does you credit," responded Balai with heavy sarcasm. "I came, if you must know, to look for the hilt where I was told I should find it—here in the studio."

"Leontine told you to look in the studio? Why, this is Julien's workshop now, and she is the last one who would want to get *him* out of the way. There's an apache——"

"Yes, I recognized La Haquenée as I came in. What about him?"

"Leontine regards herself as his personal property."

"Does he object to that?"

"No, but he is infatuated with Silva, and Leontine

is furious. Why should she want to remove Ferrard, the very one who stands between La Haquenée and her mistress?"

"Perhaps she doesn't," said the chief, growing more thoughtful. "I don't mind saying that it was not Leon-tine who told me to come here at all."

"Who was it, then?"

"That's more than I know. I received an anonymous letter, and the theft of 'The Struggle of Innocence' offered such a good excuse that I couldn't resist the temptation to make the most of it. A fishing excursion, you might call it."

"There's some mistake, some mystery in all this, *m'sieu le chef*. Overlook my reporting to Judge Tardieu, and I'll overlook your going behind my back. Surely, when we've sifted things to the bottom, you'll see that you've gone totally beyond the evidence in arresting Ferrard."

For answer the chief began to unwrap a small parcel which he held in his hand, revealing a large crimson paint tube, one end torn off so as to expose a slender object studded with jewels.

"The handle of the weapon used to stab Rougette Picot!" Clara gasped.

"As you say—the handle. While you and the judge were having your little conferences, Ferrard seems to

have been preparing to smuggle this bit of bric-a-brac out of the country with his art materials."

"Impossible! He would have thrown it away, in the Seine, for example."

"Bah! It was too valuable, Miss Hope. A murderer is always a fool."

"But he may not be a murderer. This may be a plant."

"Possibly. Let him prove it at the assizes."

Plainly it would be useless to try to stay Balai's hand any longer, now that he had such a conclusive piece of evidence to justify him. And Clara couldn't blame him, or even be certain that he was wrong—difficult as it was not to view such apparent folly as Julien's with ever increasing doubt.

"Since you're determined," she said, getting reluctantly to her feet, "there's nothing left for me to do but to wash my hands of the whole matter—and go and tell Leontine that the danger is over."

"Leontine? What danger?"

"She's been hiding in her room, for fear that you were coming here on *her* information, I suppose."

"Yes, I did let her think I might do that, though as a matter of fact I had no idea of attacking La Gadelle—especially with nothing definite to go on. But hiding, you say?"

"The wicked flee when no man pursueth," laughed Clara, mirthlessly. "She didn't know where the lightning was going to strike. But since it's only Ferrard who suffers, she won't be blamed—in the one quarter she fears."

"The apache, you mean? Don't be too sure of that," said the chief, also rising. "If he suspects her he won't waste time in reasoning about results."

"Perhaps you'd better take her with you, then."

"I think I shall—under pretended arrest. No apache would ever forgive his moll for giving information to the police, no matter where the lightning struck. Locking herself in her room isn't enough. He might get in by some hook or crook, and then——!"

The two, repressing any further expression of the uneasiness which was creeping over them, made their way to the maid's quarters. The door was as before, firmly fastened, the interior mute to all demands for admittance.

"Leontine!" Clara called. "Leontine! Here is the *chef de police*. He wants to speak to you."

Silence.

"She probably isn't there," suggested Balai. "She has fastened her door and gone out."

Clara pointed to the lock, obstructed by the key within, and stooping down manipulated a hairpin until

a metallic clash indicated that the key had been dislodged.

"That ought to have wakened her if she was asleep, *m'sieu le chef*. But there isn't a stir and I can see nothing. We'll have to break in."

"No need."

Balai produced a slender steel instrument with adjustable prongs, which Clara snatched from his hands, inserted in the keyhole and began to turn about with all the skill of a professional burglar. The old-fashioned mechanism offered few difficulties, and in a second or so the door swung open.

"Let me go in first," said the chief. "We don't know what we are going to find. Something may have happened, and—that is, of course, if she hasn't gone out by the window."

But Clara kept ahead, merely remarking that she'd been compelled in her time to look at worse sights than dead traitors. There were no signs of any disturbance, nothing on the floor, nothing on the——

She darted towards the bed, half hidden behind its curtains in an alcove. The bed showed only a carefully spread counterpane.

"The room is empty!" exclaimed the chief, after several minutes of close investigation. "And yet—look here. Both the windows are locked."

"Are you certain?"

"Quite. You see, they're the ordinary pattern—two battants swinging on hinges like doors and fastened in the middle by a bolt operated by a cross-handled knob. Both are the same, and both are securely fastened."

"Then the room can't be empty. This sort of window doesn't unlock from the outside. She's here somewhere, and we're too late."

"But——"

"The bed! Look at it, chief. It's too thick, don't you think so? Something is between the mattresses."

With a bound Balai crossed the room and snatched off the counterpane. Then together they lifted the top mattress. There lay the body of Leontine, its eyeballs slightly staring, its features a bit purple and distorted but already beginning to assume the majestic calmness of death.

For an instant Clara was almost exultant, forgetful of the pitiable figure before her.

"The trail of The Squid!" she murmured. "Here it is, unmistakable at last."

"*Que est-ce?*"

"I said—she was smothered, like Desdemona."

"No," corrected Balai, pointing to a ring of discolorations about the dead girl's throat, "she was

strangled—regular apache job. The only question is, how did he get out and manage to leave the door locked behind him? He must have had a pair of key forceps and have turned it from the hall.”

“That can’t be,” said Clara, picking up the key and offering it for examination. “Forceps would have left marks, and there are none.”

The room, alone among the servants’ quarters, was at the front of the house, and Clara, stepping out upon its balcony, could look down into the courtyard. She had left Balai staring stupidly at the key. She knew what he would do. He was a man now with a fixed idea, bent upon a certain line of action. Leontine, to his mind, had been killed by just one hand and no other, and nothing remained to be done but to discover a possible theory to account for the details.

Meanwhile, he to whom all manner of clever dodges were ready to be attributed stood idly by the fountain, as if he hadn’t a care in the world.

“Poor little crook!” said Clara to herself, looking down. “I *know* now that he isn’t responsible. Yet the law, if it catches him, will take him and shut him away from this beautiful sunshine just the same.”

The vines, hanging in great profusion from the cor-

nice above, almost hid the balcony from the view of those below. But La Haquenée had sharp eyes, and looking up he gave a questioning lift to one of his brows.

Seeming not to regard him, Clara raised her hand to her hair and began to stroke it with two outstretched fingers. It was the danger signal agreed upon that night of the vandal's visit.

Five minutes later, Balai went downstairs to take La Haquenée into custody along with Ferrard. The apache was nowhere to be found.

CHAPTER XI

AVIGNON

WHILE these events were taking place in Paris, an incident happened in Avignon, far south in the valley of the Rhone, which, though apparently trivial, needs to be recorded here because of the almost unbelievable consequences which were to flow from it.

Avignon itself, by the way, is almost unbelievable. It was an old and curious town even in 1316, when Pope Jean XXII made it famous by building there the *Palais des Papes*, whose magnificently stern gray walls, in spite of the various restorations which they have undergone, still stand as the most imposing example of undecorated medieval architecture in all France. For years it was the center of religious wars carried on by catapult and cross-bow, by knightly encounters with lance and sword and by hot pitch and stone balls dropped through artfully prepared apertures in overhanging battlements. Then oblivion settled over it, and to most people today it is only a name, or the

scene of one of the fascinating romances of the elder Dumas.

Yet Avignon is real enough, and some fifty thousand people call it home, living there in the fond belief that they are in the twentieth century. And the traveler, stopping on his way to Marseilles and passing up the broad, straight, plain-tree shaded rue de la République which leads from the station, is apt at first to agree with the native. There are trolley cars, electric lights, cinemas, billboards and cheerful-looking cafés. The only anomaly which strikes the eye at first is that furnished by *les ramparts*, a wonderful old wall of defense, bristling with towers and bastions and complicated with the cunning artifices that were in vogue when archery was the right arm of warfare—a wall without a break save for a number of arched gateways, and enclosing the entire town with a barrier thirty feet high.

But if the stranger will remain a day or two he will begin to feel that the trolley cars not the ramparts strike the anomalous note. He will find his imagination slowly being dominated by the Papal Palace and by the charms of the matchless gardens just beyond upon the summit of a butte overlooking the Rhone. And he will drift ever more and more back into the past as he gazes upon those red-gray tile roofs, that

forest of spires and towers which the view from the butte lays at his feet. For Avignon is a city of towers—towers which could no more be duplicated today than could be revived a general belief that the earth is flat.

He will soon discover, too, why so few visit this astonishing city, with its miraculously preserved atmosphere of the *moyen-age*. Seldom a week passes, either in summer or winter, when the gusts of that chilly northwest wind known as the *mistral* do not come to recall to mind the almost universal misery and discomfort under which life was lived in the historic centuries. And whenever the weather happens to be warm and windless, there arise on every side such odors as have been preserved by no other city in the Occident since kitchen drains were invented.

In fact, the modernism of Avignon is a very thin veneering, applied only in spots, and among its streets the rue de la République is a grand exception—a mere frontispiece of cleanliness and sanity to a volume of many beautiful but almost undecipherable and frequently sinister pages. Most of the streets are less than half the width of the average American sidewalk, more crooked than cow-paths, and as dark at night as is the world to the blind.

Murder there is a commonplace, and after nightfall

the square before the old city-hall—for even that comparatively modern building is old—fills up with such figures as are not to be seen elsewhere outside of jails, pest-houses and lunatic asylums. What the slums are like not even the police thoroughly know, but even a casual walk through the quarter pierced by the notorious rue des Grottes will convince one that here are the worst in modern Europe. Built upon a hillside, with many of its alleys mere twisting stone stairways; with overhanging walls—always of stone—nearly touching at the eaves of their crazy roofs and converting even noonday into an everlasting twilight; with infected ooze running sluggishly over the rough pavements—no, not even the slums of Venice can equal this, while Five Points, New York and Whitechapel, London, were in their vilest days but garden spots in comparison.

Avignon, in short, is still essentially what it was in the time of Pope Jean, and anything which could happen in the thirteenth or fourteenth century, barring a few knightly processions and the pageantry of papal inaugurations, can and does happen there now. The conventional inhabitants keep aloof, as conventional inhabitants no doubt kept aloof from the Pope's Palace, when, as frequently used to chance, it was under siege. The average citizen, not so conventional, goes

to a bull-fight every Sunday afternoon at Bagatelle, just across the river.

It was one of those rare days, when Avignon is as warm and sunny as Italy. The *mistral* for once was at rest, but the odors from the gutters had not yet recovered from the blow of the past week. In the midst of the slum quarter already mentioned, a gamin as ragged as the best but somewhat more superficial in his dirtiness, was attempting to catch a parrot which appeared to have injured itself in attempting to fly from some lofty perch. Its try for liberty, though disastrous, had not, however, robbed it of all spirit, and it was persistently evading the boy, whose patient stalking had thus far achieved no result beyond a long series of disappointments.

In the Papal Gardens, looking off towards the Rhone, was an oldish young man, of a keen, muscular build, whose clothes were of just the degree of shabbiness and disrepair to make him seem unworthy of attention.

Outside the gardens, upon the steps of the great cathedral of Notre Dame des Doms which rises between them and the Papal Residence proper, sat a man considerably less young but no less poorly dressed. He was, however, much above the average in weight and stature, and not even his craftily stooped shoulders

could hide his enormous strength. A cap containing a few pieces of money lay at his feet. For he was a beggar, and kept moaning to all passers-by, especially if they had the air of being pious:

"Brav-e per-son! Brav-e per-son!"

The rest was a mumble, but anyone familiar with the accent of the region would have been able to guess that what he said was:

"My good sir, or lady, give me something for charity. It will bring you happiness to give to the blind."

The gamin chased the parrot, whose ill-considered strike for freedom had so rudely taught it that those who live long in cages cannot fly, and finally succeeded in catching it. Wrapping the bird in his coat to prevent all biting and squawking, he hurried through a tiny slit of a street just off the rue des Grottes, darted up a dark stair which looked exceedingly rickety but was in reality as solid as masonry could make it, and entered a small, ill-lighted room.

Set at liberty, the parrot limped across the bare, cement floor, established itself in a corner, and regarded its captor in malignant silence.

"Pretty Polly!" chirped the boy. "Pretty Polly! Does Polly want a cracker?"

The parrot gave no sign either of hearing or under-

standing, and set itself slowly to preening its green plumage, though the sound of those English words, coming from such a source and in such a place, must have impressed it as something extraordinary—that is, if it really possessed any of those powers of divination and intelligence commonly attributed to its species.

The room, furnished only with a bed and a chair, was in itself extraordinary in that quarter of the rue des Grottes, for it was almost as clean as a New England kitchen. And the room beyond, into which the boy penetrated in search of food for his new pet, approached the marvelous, being not only clean but comparatively comfortable.

The man in the ancient gardens of the Pope gave a glance about him as if to make certain that he was alone, drew a pair of binoculars from a pocket of his loose-fitting coat, and trained them upon an object before him which appeared to have awakened his curiosity. It was the great tower of Philippe le Bel, rising in its medieval grandeur and simplicity from the borders of Villeneuve on the farther side of the river.

There would have been nothing remarkable in his action had he looked in the least like a tourist, or even an ordinary citizen in comfortable circumstances.

Philippe le Bel and the twin eminences of the less venerable but still picturesque Fort St. Andre beside it are well worth looking at. Interest in architecture shown by such an extremely shabby individual, however, must have excited attention had there been any attention to excite. It was odd, to say the least—as odd as such a thing as a pair of field-glasses suddenly making its appearance from such a disreputable coat.

He seemed to feel this, for he continued from time to time to glance about him. But in the Rhone country it is believed by almost everyone that unclouded sunshine is dangerous, and that shadeless corner of the bluff was deserted.

“There is nothing in Philippe le Bel—there never is any more,” muttered the observer. “I certainly must have chased old Bluebeard out for good. And that means that he has taken up his quarters nearer by.”

With that he shifted the direction of his glass from the great tower to a lesser one rising from the very quarter where the parrot-catch had so lately taken place. This closer tower rose very little above the surrounding roofs, and looked at first glance hardly like a tower at all. Its upper course had in fact, been removed, probably on account of weakened foundations,

leaving a mere stump; and about its base and nearly hiding it was a cluster of stone tenements, not more than two or three hundred years old but already dangerously out of plumb.

"If that isn't his new headquarters, at least it ought to be. I'm going to get a look inside if I have to use a flying machine."

In thus continuing to address himself, the man used an even purer brand of English than that of the boy who had caught the parrot. But on passing the beggar on his way out of the gardens, he dropped a coin into the waiting cap with an imprecation in idiomatic French.

The beggar made a sufficient display of indignation. But it was short-lived; and shuffling to his feet he almost immediately set himself to ambling with ponderous strides in his insulter's wake. If he was blind he gave no signs of it, and the two men were almost together when they reached the rue des Grottes and entered—at the very door through which the gamin had disappeared.

"Well, Squelette," said he who had used the spy-glass: "What have you got there?"

The boy, sitting on his haunches trying to coax his bird to eat a bit of cheese, turned and grinned over his shoulder.

"He's a talker, boss—at least I t'ink he is by de looks of his feaders. W'en he gits over havin' hurt himself by tryin' to be a wild 'un, maybe he can tell us somethin'. Must 've lived aroun' these diggin's quite a w'ile."

"Always fooling," said the beggar, following the others as they adjourned to the second room where a fire was burning in a sheet-iron cook-stove before a well-spread table.

"Got anything better than parrot for a man to eat?" he added in French as he lowered his great bulk into a chair. "If I was Lepadou here I'd fire you and hire a housemaid."

"If you was de boss, Mist' Forgeron," retorted the boy pleasantly, "there'd be less stuff for makin' good billiard balls between your eye-brows and de back of yer head."

Lepadou, or The Ferret—for it was indeed he—playfully pulled Le Squelette's ear and began doing justice to the substantial meal which the gamin had prepared.

"Cut out the sparring, you two," he laughed. "Ever hear of Bluebeard Forgeron?"

"Yes, and I've heard of Cock Robin and of Little Red Ridinghood, too," Forgeron grumbled. "Bluebeards, squids, parrots—what next? It's over a year

now since you got me to give up a good police job and come down here lookin' for wild geese. What have we got to show for it? A lot of experience with bad smells and bad grub. I have to pretend to beg for my livin'. At the commissariat it wasn't exactly velvet or one blaze of glory, but it beat this."

"Tut! You've had a trip to Cassis and one to Venice."

"Exactly, lookin' up two women killed by sharks."

"Not proven. And there's the *bal des Tapettes* case in Paris."

"But when are you going to take it up, chief? A glimpse of Paris, now, would be something like."

"There's no hurry, my dear man. Let the police exhaust themselves first. Then we can go in and guess that what they haven't guessed is the thing to guess at. Saves time in the end."

"I suppose so," admitted the pretended beggar grudgingly. "But for God's sake don't go and get interested in that parrot. I can't stand another animal on my mind. Fish things are enough."

Lepadou in fact had now his eyes fixed attentively on the bird, which had just stalked in from the outer room, and to the other's sally he answered nothing at all.

He had been in Europe two years now, searching for a criminal whom he believed to be at the bottom of a long series of revolting crimes, and he wasn't quite certain even yet whether this criminal was a man, an organization, or an idea. Beyond question, there *was* an idea, amounting almost to an evil spirit, more or less in evidence everywhere since the war. One could hardly pick up a newspaper without coming upon proof of it, and many said that the world had broken loose from all moral restraint and was drifting back into barbarism.

If this were so one couldn't hope to do much, and he might as well go back to New York, resume the name of McClue and once more pursue detection as a business. But he wasn't quite ready to give in to this spirit-of-evil hypothesis. It might be suggested by the state of things in Russia and Turkey, but there was no need to invoke the devil to account for America and France.

"What one really means by a devil is simply a man gone wrong," he would often say to himself. "As long as I'm on the trail of a man, let him be as bad as they make them, there's at least some hope of success."

He called this supremely bad man by many fanciful names—among them Bluebeard, as has just been noted

—but he usually thought of him now as The Squid. Strange! He had first used that word in a letter to Clara Hope, and since then had heard nothing either from her or his New York office.

The silence of the office could easily be accounted for, as the office was Clara so far as correspondence was concerned, and it was always understood that he was not to be bothered with routine matters when away on a special case. But what about the absence of love-letters?

Had it been any other sort of letter which he thought himself entitled to expect, he would have moved heaven and earth to discover what had caused their interruption. With love-letters it was different, and he had let many months go by without even making an enquiry. Then, overcoming an almost boyish sensitiveness, he had written again and yet again, three times in all, without eliciting an answer. Since then there were times when he thought that Clara regretted having promised to marry him, and was choosing silence to acquaint him with the fact. But most of the time he forced himself to see that she never could have received his letters. He even indulged in the fancy that the enemy had contrived somehow to surround him with an impalpable wall of silence, which in its way isolated him from the world as completely as if he had himself

slipped back into those dead centuries whose piles of masonry now rose about him.

It would have been difficult to entertain any such notion—back in New York. But as in the East the traveler gradually finds his Occidental habits of mind slipping from him, so by living in imagination in the Dark Ages one becomes infected by their darkness.

There was also another reason, perhaps, why he submitted so tamely to the situation. Having a duty to do, he wanted to do it alone, and was afraid that if he did succeed in opening communication with Clara she might come rushing to him, and thus become a sharer in the dangers which he knew were in the very air he breathed.

It made no difference how invisible they were, he knew that they were there. It was only natural, he argued, that the enemy should try to lull his sense of precaution. For instance, nothing at all had happened at Avignon during the entire period of his stay. Nor were the bathing accidents at Venice and Cassis entirely conclusive of The Squid's continued existence. Who could say positively that those two women had not, as the authorities generally believed, been ripped open by monster *requins*—or as Forgeron preferred to put it, by sharks?

The stabbing of the artists' model at a Paris ball, accounts of which had been recently filling the papers, was more directly suggestive. An unknown masquerader deliberately gotten up as a squid suggested that vague sort of horror which the detective had come to look for in connection with the enemy. Yet outwardly he seemed to take little interest in the case.

"It was too obviously staged to attract my attention," was the only explanation which he gave. "I believe he knows what I call him, and adopted the squid disguise as a sort of challenge. If we let him draw us out, we'll find only a tentacle. What I want is the head."

The only thing which the detective definitely knew about this Head was that it had once imprisoned an intended victim in the tower of Philippe le Bel. But that was enough. He had sensed in Avignon the place above all others where such practices as he believed this monstrous new edition of Jack l'Eventreur to be guilty of could be carried on with comparative impunity.

So he continued to hang about, quite aware that he was observed by the enemy, if the enemy had any existence outside of his own imagination; knowing, in fact, that he would be observed anywhere, but wanting

to be on the spot when the crowning horror should be attempted. There was something besides mere killing in what was going on, of that he felt assured, and he didn't believe that his presence would drive this ill-defined something out of as choice a nest as Avignon. More likely the Head would even feel safer if it knew that its pursuer were near at hand.

The parrot began to scream in the raucous fashion of its kind; Lepadou pulled himself out of the musing fit into which he had fallen. There was something in the parrot's tone which sent a curious shiver through his marrow.

"Gee!" broke in Le Squelette. "Did yeh hear dat? Sounds like he's been learned to imitate a woman."

The detective nodded.

"Sounds very much like that. I'd say he'd come from a household where one of the women was very unhappy—to put it mildly."

"Wouldn't have to look far for such a family around here," grunted Forgeron.

"That's so, though they don't usually scream. Where'd you find him, Barebones?"

"Just beyond de rue des Grottes as yeh turn to de left."

"Near my tower, then."

"What tower?" Forgeron demanded, looking up from his victuals.

"You know that block of old hovels we've been trying to get into?"

The giant assented.

"We've spent too much time poking around them for me to be likely not to. But I never seen even a counterfeiting plant that was more unsociable to strangers. That day I tried to beg there, they threw dirty water down on me—at the door with the dead vine above it, confound them."

"Exactly. And I found out today that those old buildings surround a tower. That's why I asked you just now if you'd heard of Bluebeard. He was fond of towers, and so was his original, Giles de Reys. Towers have good, thick, sound-proof walls. Nothing in the modern world can compare with them."

Lepadou stopped. The parrot, leaving off screaming, had begun to talk. It was a rapid jargon, difficult to follow, but all at once a single word came out with unmistakable clearness and was repeated time and again, followed by a mocking peal of laughter:

"Le Sèche-ha, ha, ha! Le Sèche! On m'appelle le Sèche."

"'Le Sèche, they call me le Sèche,'" translated Lepadou, leaning over to stroke the parrot's back and

getting savagely snapped at for his pains. "Wouldn't it be wonderful, Forgeron, if after all we should find him this way? I don't suppose I need call your attention to the fact that *le Sèche* is French for devil-fish, or squid?"

"It's an idea," admitted the inspector of police.

"You bet it is, and I'm going to see what comes of it."

Taking an old coat, the detective threw it over the bird, and having thus muffled its noise prepared to carry it from the room.

"Come on, Squelette," he cried. "Let's see if we can't get into friendly relations with some of these stand-off neighbors of ours by pretending to be looking for the owner of this talking devil. Anyway, we may be able to pick up some information."

But though they worked the scheme diligently for the next hour, they met with no better success than on former occasions. Those who lived in the slum about the tower knew nothing of parrots, it seemed, and cared considerably less. But they had strong feelings about intruders entering their doors, let alone getting a peep at their back yards. In one or two instances the two narrowly escaped the liquid reception of which Forgeron had complained. There was nothing left to do but return baffled to their lodgings.

"We'll have to wait, boss, and get him tame," suggested the boy, when they were back at the table finishing the interrupted meal. "Maybe he'll take to sayin' a lot of things."

"He'll have to say them mighty quick then," Lepadou answered, his mouth full of chicken pie. "I'm like Forgeron, and think it's time we were getting on to that Paris job. Guess I'll run the risk of having it spotted, and drop a wire to Tardieu. At the worst it will only fail to reach him."

He carried out his intention that very night, for a sudden restlessness had seized him, and in the morning, rather to his surprise, he found an answer waiting at the telegraph office. So, the wall of silence didn't extend in the direction of Paris. This thought, however, and the reflections it might have provoked, quickly left his mind at a sight of the message itself, which read:

"Thank God you've been heard from at last. Wish you would come here. The disappearance of your representative worries me, though perhaps you know where and why she has gone. Kindly advise."

Lepadou, his face grown suddenly white and drawn, turned to Le Squelette, who had accompanied him.

"My representative!" he repeated. "What repre-

sentative? He speaks as if it was a woman, and something appears to have happened to her. Can it be—look here, Barebones. We're starting for Paris by the next train. Go and tell Forgeron. I'm—I'm afraid it's Clara."

CHAPTER XII

AN ELOPEMENT

THE death of Leontine, Julien's arrest and the disappearance of La Haquenée had fallen like three separate thunderbolts upon the St. Germain ménage. Pa Granger, openly more affected than anybody, was for returning at once to America.

"I didn't like it here even at first," he told his wife. "Why you should ever have taken it into your head to go into Silva Jonquille's kitchen and work as if you was a hired girl is more than I can understand. But now that Millie has got herself tangled up with a criminal—it's too much. We're goin' to take the first boat home."

"I'll never desert Julien," declared Millie, coming into the room in time to hear the last remark.

"Won't you? We'll see about that. I was willin' to be a little free and easy, seein' as we were in Paris. But I draw the line at murder. You go and pack your trunk."

"Don't be ridiculous, Eben," put in Mrs. Granger soothingly. "Mr. Ferrard looks to me like a very nice young man. The only murderer we know of is that dreadful doorman. He'll be found to have done everything, mark my words."

"What? You're willin' your daughter should spend half her time tryin' to see a man who's in jail? Something's come over you, ma. Let the French courts prove that Haquenée did everything—that's *their* business. Mine is to get you two back to the United States."

And in spite of Ma Granger's firm statement that she had no intention either of dragging Millie from her young man or of leaving her alone in her trouble, her husband set out to make arrangements for departure. He had actually engaged reservations upon the next steamer leaving Le Havre before he discovered how really futile his efforts were. For the authorities flatly refused to visé his passports, politely informing him that he and his family might be needed as witnesses.

"I forgot that I wasn't livin' in a free country," he stormed.

"Stuff!" responded his wife. "I don't believe you're really vexed about that."

"Why don't you believe it?"

"Because, it won't be any disgrace, will it, if the papers home report our testimony? It isn't everybody who can get as far as testifyin' in court—in Paris."

"Maybe not. And I don't object to it so much so far as only I'm concerned. But to have you and Millie——"

"You can't keep us out, pa. We've got a right to our little fling too. And when I think how *blue* it will make some of the neighbors feel, it goes a good ways towards reconcilin' me with the designs of Providence."

"Well," snorted Granger, "if I'm goin' to be called to testify I mean to have something to testify *to* when I get there. Needn't think that we'd any of us make much of a hit in Salem, Mass., with any of the information we've collected so far."

"What do you mean, pa?"

"I mean that we're in a state of complete ignorance as to what is and has been actually goin' on in this house. In court you ain't allowed to tell what you think and suppose. You've got to know."

It was thus that Granger announced his intention of playing the detective, and a few evenings later, as he and his life-partner were getting ready for bed, he reopened the subject with hints of a clue.

"I don't suppose you've noticed," he said, "what a mighty little amount of worry Silva's showin' over what's likely to happen to this young Ferrard?"

"She is behavin' splendidly," declared the wife, pinning a silk handkerchief neatly around her head so she might not "miss" the switch which had been temporarily relieved of duty.

"I call it heartless," said Granger. "For after all they were engaged, and now when he's standin' under the shadow of the guillotine——"

"Oh, she knows *that* isn't goin' to happen to him," ma broke in. "As to her bein' engaged, she sees now she's got to give him up to Millie."

"Wish she hadn't given him up quite so easy," the other grumbled. "If you want my opinion, she was glad of an excuse. She's got her eye on the butler."

"A servant? Eben, what *are* you talkin' about!"

But Mrs. Granger was unable to keep a shade of interest from creeping into her tone, and Granger, thus encouraged, paused impressively in front of her and began to emphasize his words with a forefinger.

"Servants," he said, "is human beings like the rest of us, and a man is a man and women are women. Clara Hope has got her eye on the butler too. Haven't you noticed how Silva watches her?"

"I'm disappointed in Clara," admitted the wife, seating herself thoughtfully on the edge of the bed. "She looked like a quiet girl, and she's turnin' out I must say to be somethin' of a flirt."

"Never mind your disappointment, ma—look deeper. It isn't Peters that Clara Hope is after."

"Bless me! Who is she after, then?"

"Who? Have you forgotten how the chief of police tore around here that day the body of the chambermaid was found? He was expectin' to arrest La Haquenée—thought he knew just where to lay his hands on him. But the fellow'd already gone, and hasn't been seen or heard of since. Now do you get the point?"

"I remember, of course, but don't see what there is in it to make a point of."

"You don't? Why, a minute or two before he disappeared he's known to have been in the courtyard. And Clara was up in a balcony lookin' out. She must have given him the tip, that's the point. And now she's pretendin' to be sweet on Peters just for the sake of pullin' the wool over our eyes. She's Haquenée's girl. You can't fool me—anyway, not as easy as that."

"Eben, what's got into you lately?" asked Mrs.

Granger, betraying her first trace of uneasiness. "You never used to get so excited over other people's business."

"Do you call it other people's business when Millie goes to see a man who's in prison?"

"No, but you needn't be so uncharitable even about that. And we were speakin' of Clara Hope. For heaven's sake don't you go sayin' anything around."

"I shan't, ma—at least not yet. But since I've got to be here I'm goin' to keep my eye peeled. It's time we knew something about the sort of folks we're livin' with."

While this conversation was going on up stairs, Clara, on the lower floor, was doing a great deal to justify at least a certain part of Granger's avowed suspicions. Certainly a change had come over her since the discovery of Leontine's lifeless body. She seemed to have become timid, and Peters could no longer move without finding her at his heels.

"I am afraid in this house," she kept telling him. "Every minute I expect to come upon that apache, and have my throat cut."

The butler at first retired before her as from danger. But she persisted, forcing him to listen to detailed reasons for her fears.

"I've thought it all out," she would say. "Leontine

was a police spy, and Haquenée killed her on that account."

"How could he have killed her with the door locked?" was Peter's invariable question. "Nobody could either get in or get out."

"*Somebody* did it. And getting in was easy enough. The door hadn't *always* been locked."

"But getting out?"

"He didn't get out. He stayed there with the body until Balai and I picked the lock. He was in there when we were, don't you see? Probably hiding behind the door. And he slipped out when we weren't looking. It makes me shiver to think of it."

This conversation, always practically the same, was strung over a number of different occasions, but on no occasion did she mention having seen La Haquenée just *before* the lock was picked. Pa Granger, who observed a number of these interviews from a distance, was in no position to mark the omission, or even to sense the intense watchfulness which lurked in the depths of Clara's eyes. What he noted was simply what he termed her "carryings on."

The situation might have deceived almost anyone, especially when Peter's cautious frigidity began to thaw. But it was not until this very evening, when

Granger was confiding his suspicions to his wife, that Clara, seated in a dim corner below stairs and pressed by the butler to explain how any criminal could possibly have found the nerve to remain in a locked room with the body of his victim, finally ventured:

“Did you ever hear of Lepadou?”

Peters shook his head.

“Well, I’m working for him,” she went on. “His real name is Ferris McClue, and for months now he’s been on the track of a human monster, a sort of modern Jack the Ripper. Marle, some call him. Others know him as Le Caillou. Both names mean a kind of stone. And *he* would be capable of staying in the room with the body—even gloating over it. For he has the hardest heart in the world.”

There was a sudden stir in the shoulder upon which she had been resting her head.

“Do you mean you’re not a servant girl?” Peters demanded.

“I’m a detective,” said Clara simply. “But the point is, this man I’m telling you about murders like a wild beast, with no motive apparently except the pleasure he gets in contemplating suffering. Can you imagine anything more horrible?”

She had raised her head, and there was a gleam so sharply observant in the look she cast upon the butler

that only a blind man could have pretended not to notice it. Peters responded as if to an open challenge:

“So you’ve been suspecting *me* all the while, have you, and only pretending that you thought it was Haquenée?”

“Perhaps. Or perhaps I wasn’t sure.”

The answer was a soundless laugh.

“I’ll say then that you’re brave, whatever else you are. The monster you describe would be apt to strangle you.”

“And what are *you* going to do?”

“Tell you something. I’m a detective myself—from Scotland Yard.”

Clara turned away so that the expression of her face could not be observed. Then she too laughed.

“You don’t blame me, Peters, for wanting to make sure?”

“Not at all. But aren’t you even surprised?”

“A little, maybe. If you’re a detective, what has become of l’Estrange’s butler?”

“I’m his butler.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s simple enough. There’s been talk about l’Estrange in London for a number of years now.

Folks say he's been working a big swindle by forging old masters and selling them over there."

"Then you're not working on either of the murders?"

"No."

"And l'Estrange is a swindler?"

"That's what I've been hired to find out."

"I see. And how we've been misunderstanding each other—you and I. But it's all right now."

"I'm not so sure, Clara, I'm not so sure."

"Why, what is there now?"

"A lot. You've been pretending to want a good deal of my company lately—to protect you from La Haquenée, you said it was."

"Well, it was true, Peters, that part of it. He knows I pointed him out to Balai in the garden, not to mention what he may have overheard me say inside. It's no joke to have betrayed an apache, and he still at large."

The stealthy watchfulness had crept back into her eyes. One would almost have said that its stealthiness was wilfully thin. And again she was avoiding the truth about La Haquenée. But this time Peters did not start. He appeared to be absorbed in his own ideas.

"You remember what I said to you that night in your room," he brought out after a silence.

"Yes, you said you were dangerous when roused, and pretended to be a dreadful lady-killer. But that was a part of your made-up character of course."

"But it wasn't. And I didn't pretend to be a lady-killer exactly. I said that there were some women it was hard for me to keep away from, and that you were one of them. That was true even when I thought you were a servant girl."

"Peters!"

"That's right, laugh at me. I thought you were an impudent little hussy trying to make your place easy for yourself, and yet I found it hard to keep away. You can imagine how I feel about it, now that I know who you really are."

"Is it as bad as that?"

"It couldn't be much worse. When I was really the butler here I naturally thought it beneath me to have anything to do with the under-servants. One gets in the habit of not thinking of them as human beings. That helped me keep my head with you at first. But now——!"

Peters choked.

Clara's hand, which had been lying abandoned in her lap, made an almost infinitesimal movement. He

caught it and drew it to him with sudden passion. If a shudder went through her he did not appear to notice it, and in another instant her lips were his.

“Then it wasn’t all pretense, Clara—your wanting me?”

She answered slowly, at the end of a silence: “No, it wasn’t all pretense, and it isn’t. I want you as I never wanted anybody in my life.”

The two were so occupied that they did not notice a third who came within sight of them, then stole away with a soft rustling of skirts. Not Granger but Silva had caught them this time. Wringing her hands as if in acute distress, she hurried rapidly away to Clara’s room, from which she came out a moment later carrying a bundle. This, too, escaped observation, though the time came when the contents of that bundle were known wherever newspapers were read.

What was never published was a letter written a little later by Clara to Judge Tardieu, which, after a few preliminary explanations, proceeded as follows:

It has been arranged, and we are to elope. You will understand that Peters is not duped, either by my toleration of him near me or by my pretense of trusting him. I made it too clear that I thought the murderer of Leontine was

The Squid for him to have any doubts about my being dangerous—that is, worth suppressing. But he thinks I *think* he is duped, to a certain extent at least. So he is going to let me fancy that I am trapping him, hoping thus to lead me on until I am trapped myself.

It was amusing, in spite of the odiousness of it all, to see him maneuvering. On the face of things there was nothing to prevent our being married openly and honestly, and of course I made a feint of standing out for this. He began at once to make believe that he was afraid of the apache himself—on *my* account.

“Haquenée,” he said, “mustn’t know where you are, or even that we have gone away together. I’ll never breathe easy until you’re safely hidden out of his way.”

It was very thin, but then that was all it needed to be. Peters wasn’t trying to convince me of his own good intentions, or do anything else but give himself an excuse for carrying out his game. The only thing in which he imagines I’m deceived is in my estimate of his powers—and my own. As to that, God knows he may be right. But I’ve got to take the risk, for unless I can get him to lead me to his nest in hopes of getting me completely in his hands, I shall never know where nor what that nest is.

Oh, I am sure I’m on the trail. If he wasn’t The Squid I could never feel such an intense loathing. There is something about him now which makes the blood fairly crawl. He knows how I feel, yet fancies that I am gloating over

my skill in having hidden it. And I am to leave here tomorrow without telling a soul, with the promise that he is to follow me in two or three days.

If you still have any doubts about his being our man, listen to this:

The place where I am to wait for him is Rognerons—yes, Rognerons, *a tiny way-station not three miles from Avignon!*

I am to take the eight o'clock train for Marseilles, but as that doesn't stop at Rognerons, I change at Lyons to the local, and once at my destination am supposed to put up at an inn called the Hôtel de la Paix. Do you see how carefully the arrangements have been made to delay my arrival till after dark, and also to give him a chance to be there ahead of me?

I wonder how far I shall get before something happens, and whether it is to happen before I reach the inn or afterwards. Perhaps there isn't any such inn—but that is a detail. You mustn't try to have me shadowed this side of Lyons. It would be too risky, and I'm almost certain of Lyons. Beyond that—well, look for me as I leave the station at Rognerons, for it is then, I believe, that I will be getting into the outer meshes of the net. Wire to the police there. But be certain to have them in plain clothes, and under orders to take no action unless an emergency calls for it, since if we give the slightest alarm I'll get nowhere and discover nothing.

I may not even have a chance to post this letter, in

which case I shall start anyway, and depend upon luck. It has done me good to write it, whether it ever reaches you or not, for I simply had to confide in somebody. It may be my last adventure. But I mustn't think of that. As Mr. McClue used to say, "Take your precautions, but never really think of the danger till it's over!"

On the morning after writing this letter, Clara found under her door a railroad ticket with the reservation of an entire first-class compartment on the *rapide* to Lyons. She had wondered whether the plot was to have her take any particular coach or not, and here was the answer.

"It's a test," she reflected. "Nothing will disturb me between here and Lyons, but he wants to see how reckless I am, how far I am willing to trust myself. Anyway, I'm going to use this transportation."

She packed a hand-bag, made certain of the good condition of her favorite automatic, and went quietly downstairs. In a dark corner of the lower corridor the butler was waiting for her.

"You swear that you'll truly marry me?" she demanded in a pleading note after the first exchange of greetings, though the hollowness of the farce she was playing almost made her laugh.

Peters pressed her hand.

"I'm leaving you independent until I do, ain't I? Don't talk foolishness. Here's money for traveling expenses."

He thrust some notes into her hand, and she left the house without encountering another living creature. This was what she had hoped and expected. Being alone, she might post her letter to Judge Tardieu. But how could she be certain that she was alone? Even that man carrying a sack of coals who now appeared from out the morning mists in the direction of the river might be appointed to watch her; and by the time she came within sight of the first of those little tobacco shops in the fronts of which most of the letter-box slots of Paris are fixed, the streets were lively with early laborers hurrying in and out of quick-service *comptoirs* where coffee is sold over bars for a couple of sous.

So she let the letter remain in her bag, reached the *gare de Lyons* and boarded her train. There she was for the first time met by the unexpected. Her compartment had been lavishly decorated with white bridal roses.

Clara choked. Oh, why hadn't she married The Ferret long ago instead of letting every little thing interfere? Then she would have had him by her side this minute. He would not be lost, and she would not

be enduring this horrible travesty of a wedding-journey. Yes, most decidedly, the flowers were too much.

But the train had not been long in motion before it came to her that Peters might have had some motive besides a wanton desire for mockery. He was making her conspicuous. Not even the blindest police force on earth would have any difficulty in tracking the young woman with a single handbag who had traveled in a bower of roses. As far as Lyons, that is. Beyond that she would disappear among the crowds.

But assured at least of a respite, she leaned back in her seat and let the landscape of the so-called *côte d'or* swirl past the windows. Certainly there was nothing *golden* about the outlook, threatening rain-clouds giving it for the time a decidedly bleak and barren appearance.

A small envelope half concealed in a bunch of flowers in the seat opposite finally caught her eye. It contained a sheet of paper on which was typewritten:

"Have wired for a limousine to meet you at R. so as to save you the trouble of hunting up the hotel after dark. Please wear some of the flowers, as it is by them that the driver is to know you."

Here at last was a sure sign that she was actually en route for the great adventure, evidence that the fate intended for her could not be carried out save where

the key to the mystery was hidden. And where was that? No need to ask the question now. The pretense of having her stop at Rognerons was hollow indeed, with this limousine waiting to take her to Avignon.

How wonderfully Mac had sensed from the first that the place was Avignon. But had he gone there? Had he found what she was going to find, and never been able to get word to the world? The thought made her shiver, but did not tempt her to give up. It was too late now to think of getting her letter to Tardieu. She must manage, somehow, to telegraph him from Lyons. Meanwhile it might be well to see who else was aboard. That promised driver at Rognerons had made her think of accomplices.

She left her compartment and passed the entire length of the train, pretending to be looking for a seat. There was a surplus of passengers. There always is on the continent, or at least seems to be, for it is a poor traveler who cannot multiply himself into two or three by the aid of a little baggage. Those loungers in the narrow aisles along the side of the coach invariably leave their contemplation of the view and rush to claim every unencumbered place the moment a new-comer seeks to penetrate their compartment. Clara could not help smiling, for this ancient game was still some-

what new to her. But what she was particularly looking for was a man whose glance at the bunch of roses which she now wore at her breast should betray more than a casual interest; and being absorbed in what proved a vain undertaking, she totally overlooked a woman wearing a veil and wrapped in a long, gray *imperméable*, or waterproof coat, who was standing half hidden at the further end of the corridor in her own car.

The instant Clara passed, this woman, without looking up at all, slipped into the vacant compartment. But it was vacant again when Clara returned, and having her thoughts still on other matters she failed to note any signs of its having been visited.

At Lyons she got out, took a bit of paper on which she had written a message to Tardieu, pinned it to a generous bank note and tossed it into the bureau of the *Postes et Télégraphes* as she passed. A despatch written in cipher and addressed to the *Palais de Justice*, would, she felt confident, not be neglected, and she had acted so quickly that it was practically impossible for anyone to have observed the maneuver at all.

From Lyons she traveled third class, and felt safe in the throng of disputing, laughing, eating, drinking and singing bourgeois that surrounded her. The gay-

ety of the French middle classes en tour is contagious, and in spite of the slow speed and frequent stops the trip was not even tedious. Nevertheless it was after nightfall when she at last stepped out upon the platform at Rognerons.

The place was dimly lighted and practically deserted. But there, just beyond the barrier where she gave up her ticket, stood a waiting limousine. Tardieu should have wired to the local force long ere this. But if he had, his agents were certainly obeying instructions and keeping out of sight. She had hardly hoped for such skill and discretion among the representatives of the *Sûreté General* in a small town. Could it be that her message had miscarried, and that she was plunging into the unknown without protection?

"How unreasonable I am," she whispered to herself. "I would have been angry if anybody had come openly and spoiled it all, and here I am half frightened because everything is being done just as I asked."

Another woman had alighted from the train, a woman wearing a veil and a long, gray *imperméable*—and Clara was surprised to note that she had a large bunch of white roses at her breast. More surprising still, this unknown made straight for the waiting machine, and before even a protest could be raised had

entered it and disappeared around a corner, the driver showing every sign of having received his instructions in advance.

Of course the fact might be just that. Why shouldn't a woman be expected, and be driven off to her destination? But the roses were a strange coincidence, to say the least. And there was no other machine in sight.

Was this some of Balai's work? Had he discovered her plans and sent one of his own operators to carry them out in her stead? It seemed unlikely, not to say impossible. Then the woman might be an innocent traveler. And she had been mistaken for Clara and was being whirled all unsuspecting towards the headquarters of The Squid!

Agitated beyond measure, Clara left the station and made for the lights of a garage which were dimly visible through the fog and drizzle.

"Did you notice that limousine?" she asked of the garage-keeper who came forward to meet her. "Did you see which way it went?"

"*Mais oui, madame.* It took the Avignon road, *et très vite.*"

"Very well, then. I want to hire a machine—the fastest one you have—and a driver."

The garage-keeper made difficulties, declaring that his only available chauffeur was still at dinner. Being of Latin blood, it was difficult for him to conclude a business deal in otherwise than a leisurely manner, with a certain amount of time devoted to compliments and irrelevant but excited conversation. But the terms which Clara offered so moved him that within less than five minutes she found herself on the road to Avignon with the garage-keeper himself at the wheel. The road if dark was also empty, and they drove recklessly until—within about a mile of the city—the tail-lights of the other car came in sight.

After that it was easy following, and the two machines were brought practically together by the customs inspection which both had to undergo at the ramparts. Avignon still clings to the ancient practice of the local *duane*, and one cannot return from the shortest excursion beyond the walls, even in the street cars, without having to declare that nothing taxable or forbidden is being smuggled in. The inspection is a farce—for where could one buy contraband or much of anything else in the vicinity of Avignon? But the principle of interference with trade, coming down from the days of the crusades, is maintained, and that appears to be the point. In this instance a few words

were exchanged between the customs agent and the first of the two drivers, so the advantage of the forward car was entirely lost.

Clara passed beneath a magnificent arch of masonry without being at all conscious of the completeness with which she was leaving the twentieth century behind. Her mind was filled with the other woman. What could have happened to keep her silent all this while? Surely if she had taken that car by mistake, thinking it was her own conveyance, she would have raised an outcry at the first unexpected turn. Was it possible that she meant to come to Avignon? Or was there someone else in the car, someone who had concealed himself until it was too late for her to escape? In that case she was probably already drugged, or otherwise rendered insensible. And she was being whirled to her doom by a man who thought she was his master's intended victim.

"When she stops and they take her out, I'll have to do something even if I ruin all my plans," Clara told herself as the car ahead moved leisurely through the length of a broad, straight, well-lighted street.

After a few blocks the traffic dispersed into narrow ways on either hand, for the street had come to an end in an open square several feet higher than itself and accessible only to pedestrians. The forward auto-

mobile stopped and the woman with the roses got out, apparently under no shadow of restraint.

Clara paid her driver, told him to wait where he was for an hour before going home, and set forth on foot. It began to look as if this were indeed one of the chief's operators, and that she had worn the roses on purpose to have her identity mistaken. Anyway, she was permitting herself to be led quite unresistingly by the man who had driven her in. They crossed a corner of the square, came to the mouth of a dark and narrow alley, and were quickly engulfed in obscurity.

In following them Clara experienced a sensation like that of stepping from a lighted room into a cellar. The slippery, uneven pavements had worse than a cellary smell, and the walls of the dim buildings on the alley's either side made one think of the crypt of some devil's cathedrals, being too close together to seem like houses bordering a public right-of-way. At intervals a miserable light shone feebly in the murky atmosphere—more like a glow-worm than a street-lamp—and below one such she caught a glimpse of a half-destroyed sign, on which was still to be deciphered the words:

"Rue des Grottes."

There came a low door, at which the woman's companion knocked softly. It opened, and Clara—follow-

ing now close upon the heels of the couple—noticed only a dead vine above her head as she stepped in after them. Then the door shut, leaving her in total darkness.

Without knowing it, she stood within one of the stone tenements about Bluebeard's tower at whose door The Ferret had so often knocked in vain.

CHAPTER XIII

LEPADOU ENTERS THE TOWER

IT seemed to Lepadou an interminable trip from Avignon to Paris. Had he known that it was certainly Clara of whose disappearance Judge Tardieu had written, it would have been easier to endure the delay, for she must have been gone for a couple of days now and whatever was to happen had probably happened already. But the detective was tortured by the hope that in spite of all appearances to the contrary it might be some other woman—some enemy agent, perhaps, who had merely assumed Clara's position. It was a thin hope and hardly supported by reason, but it sufficed to make the wheels of the night train seem to stand still even as they rushed along at the best speed of the famous P. L. and M.

Arriving at an hour when only work people were abroad, he proceeded nevertheless to the *Palais de Justice*. Tardieu had not yet put in an appearance, but he had left a message for this particular visitor saying where he would be found—at about noon.

Lepadou had the morning on his hands and employed it in securing lodgings for himself, Forgeron, Le Squelette and the parrot, choosing an obscure locality on the rue Monge not far from the *Jardin des Plantes*. Tardieu had said that he would be at the boulevard St. Germain establishment, and thither Lepadou hurried when it was finally time.

The judge was in l'Estrange's studio, seated before one of the pictures with a wrapt expression more suggestive of an art-critic than a magistrate. He started up at the sight of the detective's drawn and haggard face.

"I'm afraid," he began, grasping the other's hand, "you don't know where the young lady has gone."

"Who was she?" demanded Lepadou, sitting down. "What did she call herself? I know of nobody here who was assisting me."

"Clara Hope was the name she gave—and her credentials were beyond question."

"So much the worse. Is this the party?"

He took a small photograph from his pocket and held it out. Tardieu nodded.

"That is undoubtedly the party. But what is it? You look ghastly. Of course to have your assistant——"

"My assistant was also my fiancée."

“Good God!” cried Tardieu. “And I let her undertake the most dangerous case that ever came into my hands.”

“It wasn’t your fault, Judge. You didn’t know. But tell me what has become of her?”

“Vanished like a puff of smoke. I wasn’t consulted about her final adventure—kindly believe that.”

“I do, but there’s no good in our sitting here crying over spilled milk. Tell me everything that’s happened, from that *bal des Tapettes* affair down to the present moment.”

Tardieu complied, briefly outlining all the information in his possession relating to the deaths of Rouquette and Leontine and to Silva Jonquille’s household.

“Balai is certain that the culprit was La Haquenée, at least in Leontine’s case,” he went on, “and for once I must say I think he is right. But this series of disappearances——”

“Series? Have there been others besides Clara’s?”

“Have there? My dear man, in one single morning I received a batch of reports from this house that made me think I must be asleep and dreaming. This apache—you remember him?”

“Distinctly.”

“Well, he had slipped off the day before. And now it was Miss Hope and——”

“Who else?”

"Silva Jonquille and the butler. With Ferrard in a cell, that left only the Grangers here. You see, Balai was so taken up with his search for the apache that he neglected to set a guard. This was last Monday. Peters—he's the butler—came back the next day, but he refuses to give any clear account of himself."

"How about Miss Jonquille?"

"Still missing. We've heard no more of her than we have of Miss Hope—less, in fact, for we know that Miss Hope took the morning *rapide* as far as Lyons, traveling in such style that I think she was trying to leave a trail. But beyond Lyons everything is lost. Tuesday I sent you word, and here we are ~~+~~ Wednesday, and no further advanced, though it is obvious, I suppose, that Miss Jonquille was either with or after the apache, and that Clara Hope followed *them*."

"Why obvious? Clara, if I know her, would only have followed a suspect."

"Isn't La Haquenée a suspect? The chief, as I told you, had been employing Leontine as a spy, and we're justified in concluding that the apache did for her when he found it out."

"Hm! How long had La Haquenée been missing before the body was found?"

"He wasn't missing until *after* the body was found. According to the testimony of several witnesses who

saw him from the street, he'd been hanging about the courtyard for fifteen or twenty minutes. Then Clara came out on a balcony and he dodged back of the house. That's the last we've heard of him."

"Naturally," said Lepadou. "For of course he climbed over the rear wall and took to some cover which he'd already prepared. But you say the doors and windows of Leontine's room were locked. If he was in the courtyard for twenty minutes before the alarm was given, he must have been there while her room was still fastened. Therefore he couldn't have been guilty of going in, murdering the girl, and coming out again—and Clara must have known it."

"But somebody was guilty," objected the judge. "There must be a trick about that locked room, and Haquenée could have worked it as easily as another."

"Maybe—or maybe the murderer locked himself in with the body and stayed there till Clara and Balai entered. Then he could have slipped out. But in that case he wouldn't have had the preceding twenty minutes in the garden. Until you *find* some trick about the locked room I'm afraid I'll have to leave the apache to one side."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Tardieu with some chagrin. The chief suggested that there must be a trick, and I

let my mind be carried away by the idea. But—slipped out behind their backs! That's a whole lot simpler. I'm ashamed that it never occurred to me."

"It occurred, you may be sure, to Clara, so it's unlikely that she wasted any time over La Haquenée. We must look for somebody who wasn't seen during the period when Leontine's room is known to have been closed against entry. What about this Peters?"

"Why, a good deal but nothing very definite. At one time I know Miss Hope suspected him of not being what he pretended to be."

"Good. But what was her attitude towards him after this second murder?"

"I can tell you that," cried a voice from the hall, as Pa Granger—unable any longer to content himself with the post of listener—burst into the studio.

"I'd been keeping an eye on things for some time," he went on. "Anyone could see that there was something in the wind from the way she and Peters was always goin' off into corners and whisperin'. I thought it was a bluff at first—that she was really sweet on La Haquenée—and I don't know yet that I wasn't right. But after Leontine was killed, I tell you, the Hope girl went after the butler in good earnest. Such sweet-heartin' I never saw. It was scandalous."

Clearly Granger had only a vague idea of whom he

was addressing, but Lepadou refused to permit him to be interrupted, being anxious for information whatever the source. It thus came out that on the morning of Clara's departure Granger was up early and had caught sight of her saying good-bye to Peters.

"Our friend appears to be a typical amateur bloodhound," remarked the detective with a bitter smile when once again he and the judge were alone. "More vindictive than sympathetic. Nevertheless he helps to establish your most important point. Clara *was* cultivating Peters, and must have had a purpose. And now I'd like to have a talk with *Mrs.* Granger."

Tardieu rose and addressed himself to an old-fashioned bell-pull.

"Have you discovered anything?" cried Millie, entering a few seconds later in response to the summons.

"Only that we want to see your mother," responded the judge.

"But why haven't you? Why don't you do something?"

"What is there for us to do, do you think?" Lepadou put in.

"Why, to find out that Mr. Ferrard is innocent."

"Is there any doubt about it, then?"

"Of course not. But Chief Balai can't seem to see it and insists on keeping him locked up in a cell."

"I'll see what I can do to bring the chief to reason."

"You will? Then I'll never forget you the longest day I live."

It was with difficulty that Millie could be induced to go. Was not here a man at last who seemed capable of understanding her faith? She would have liked to stay and pour out her heart to him all day.

"Too bad to lift her hopes too high," sighed Tardieu, watching the door close finally behind her. "Since Balai found that dagger hilt in Ferrard's paint-tube I've hardly dared to look that young lady in the face."

"If I were you," suggested the detective, "I'd look askance at the paint-tube."

"Why?"

"Nothing, only innocent young girls have sometimes strange ways of being in the right. Who was it tipped off Balai to search the studio, Silva Jonquille?"

"Pardon me," retorted the judge with considerable heat, "but I believe it was an anonymous letter. You don't know her, of course, but Silva Jonquille strikes me as a person who might have a strange way of being right."

"At her age? I'm afraid she'd be too forgiving to insist on rightness. Millie Granger, you see, was her rival—apparently a very successful one. Did she

blame Millie, or only blame Ferrard? It isn't so easy to fathom a woman's feelings in a case like this."

"Here is Mrs. Granger!" cried Tardieu, jumping nimbly to his feet. "She, I think, will be able to convince you that Silva hated nobody at all."

But Mrs. Granger seemed not in her usual spirits, and suffered herself to be introduced without offering a word beyond what the ceremony required. Pressed for an opinion of her missing protégée, she became fussy in her choice of a chair, as if in no hurry to respond.

"You don't know how bad I feel about that girl," she brought out at last. "And when I think that maybe it's all my fault——"

"Your fault," interrupted the two men in a breath.

"That's what Eben says. 'Ma,' says he, 'you're foolish to go on accusin' yourself when there ain't a thing to accuse yourself of.' But I ought to have told somebody what I've been keepin' to myself—from everybody, that is, exceptin' Eben, and he's only heard of it just now."

McClue made a movement of impatience.

"I'm listening," he let fall.

"I notice you are, young man, but you must give me time to get my breath. All I wanted to say is—Silva has wandered off."

"Has what?"

"She was queer, that's as near as I can describe it," continued the narrator without noticing the question. "Her grandfather, you know, was queer before her, and led a scandalous life. I don't mean that she took after him in that, but she had spells of accusin' herself of things that she didn't know whether she'd done or not. And she took it to heart to think that she resembled the old reprobate in some respects."

"Then it's your opinion that she has wandered away in one of these spells you tell us about?"

"That's what I'm trying to say if you'd only give me time. I believe she has wandered away and done herself a harm. And I might have had her watched."

Mrs. Granger began violently wiping her eyes, and it was only after repeated urging that she went on:

"That's all I know about Silva. And as for Clara Hope, I guess it's only too plain that worryin' is thrown away on her. There's one thing, though, that puzzles me."

"What is that, Mrs. Granger?"

"Her trunk. If she went away voluntarily and for no good reason, she couldn't have expected to come back. So why didn't she take her trunk with her? I've asked Eben, and he can't give a guess at it any more than I can."

"What did she take?" asked McClue in a carefully controlled voice.

"Just a grip-sack," was the answer, "and not much in it either. I put her room to rights the mornin' after she was missin' and everything was there except her brush and comb, a black alpaca she usually worked in and a black and white shepherd's plaid that I've seen her have on sometimes in the afternoon."

"But if she left her trunk——"

"Oh, there was nothing much in her trunk except a lot of theatrical truck in a tray tucked in at the bottom. Stage-struck sometime, I suppose. She didn't even lock it."

Mrs. Granger took her departure without making any further revelations.

"I can't believe it," ruminated Tardieu. "Silva Jonquille was never irresponsible. It's just an old wives' tale."

"I hope you'll forgive me," Lepadou returned, "but I'm more interested for the moment in Clara's baggage. It's rather surprising."

"Her taking so little?"

"No, her taking so much. Why that alpaca dress since she also had the shepherd's plaid? But we must get to Peters."

"Yes, but wouldn't you first like to talk with l'Estrange?"

"What, is he in town?"

"He's here in the house. Arrived last night, but I'd forgotten to tell you."

Tardieu went personally to knock on the door of the famous artist's suite, and a few minutes later l'Estrange appeared. He was dressed in conventional street clothes save for a black velvet smoking-jacket which gave a touch of informality to his otherwise rather severe figure. His manner when Lepadou was presented expressed the quiet cordiality of a man of the world, and as he flung himself a bit wearily upon a long, cushioned seat, he asked in what manner he could be of service.

"You must be vexed at the loss of your pictures," suggested Lepadou, as if anxious to avoid a direct interrogatory. "Two gone, I understand—one through an act of deliberate malicious mischief."

"Yes—and a third damaged and clumsily repaired."

"I hadn't heard of that. Do you suspect anyone?"

"Nobody. The judge here says that the malicious mischief was done by a man named Bec. All I know is he made a very thorough job of it. The shreds of canvas—or what's left of them since Miss Hope hid them between her mattresses—are all to the bad, as you Americans say."

"Clara hid them? Mrs. Granger didn't mention——"

"I rescued them in advance of her," explained Tardieu. "And now that we're talking of pictures, there's something I'm reminded of, l'Estrange. Miss Hope had an idea—which I was inclined to share with her—that you painters with your knowledge of the human face could tell us magistrates a great deal if you only would. But she always said you would never put your professional insight at our disposal."

"And she was right, as far as I am concerned," responded the painter. "The things I guess about people would hardly do for a police *dossier*, and I'm afraid your juries would regard them as very poor evidence."

"Yet if you want my impressions," he went on, turning towards Lepadou and dropping from French into English, "I don't mind making an exception—in favor of Miss Jonquille. The idea seems to be current that she has run away with an apache. That's the final absurdity. She is in some respects a very unfortunate woman, but I can't imagine her running away at all. Perhaps I'm influenced by own personal interest, but the very notion is to me impossible."

"Your personal interest?" ventured the detective.

L'Estrange nodded.

"She was mad after Julien Ferrard, and I gather that the cad deserted her. I feel free to confess that in his place I would have acted otherwise."

"How far does your bad impression of Ferrard go?"

"No farther than I have indicated."

"But you said that Miss Jonquille was unfortunate."

"Yes, in loving a man unworthy of her. I meant no more than that."

"And this Peters," Tardieu interposed. "There's no doubt, I suppose about his really being your old butler?"

"Oh, none in the least. It would be difficult to duplicate as good a servant as he is. Would you like to talk to him? I'll send him in."

L'Estrange took his leave, his manner more reserved than when he entered, as if his defense of La Gadelle had led him further than he had intended. Almost immediately Peters arrived at the door, downcast and embarrassed.

"My master says I must tell you everything," he began, addressing the detective. "It isn't much, sir, and nothing to be proud of. Nothing to be ashamed of, either. I'm not the first man who was ever made game of by a woman."

"I don't understand you."

"I was referring to Clara, sir, the *bonne à tout faire*—or rather, the girl I thought was the *bonne à tout*

faire. If you'll pardon my saying so, I found her very much to my mind—at least at first—and the feeling seemed to be reciprocated. So we decided to go away together. For the looks of things, and so as not to attract the attention of the doorman who had turned out to be a dangerous criminal, we changed our plans at the last minute—she starting ahead and I promising to follow her in a few days.”

“Where is she now?”

“I don't know, sir. You see she had just told me that she was not a servant but a detective. In fact I pretended that I was a detective, too, not wanting her to think that I was beneath her. And my idea was that this Haquenée might be laying for her, and that she'd better slip away alone so I could see that he didn't pick up her trail. But the minute she'd gone I got to thinking—there's no telling about women. So I took the next train, to make sure that she really intended to meet me and——”

“Confound you,” The Ferret interrupted, “get to the point. *Where* had you told her to meet you?”

“At a place called Rognerons, sir, at the Hôtel de la Paix. But——”

There was a knock. Millie Granger stood at the door, this time with a message.

“It's from Miss Hope, in a cipher I gave her,” cried Tardieu, when he had torn open the envelope. “And

here's another from the *bureau* of the *Postes et Télégraphes* at Lyons."

Lepadou snatched the second message, and while the judge was busy with the cipher read half a dozen lines of French to the following effect:

"We are transmitting a communication picked up in this office last Tuesday morning by the charwoman. She put it into her pocket and failed to give it up until now. Beyond the fact that it was wrapped in a bank bill, we know nothing further about it."

The cipher message, as whispered by the judge into the detective's ear, ran thus:

"I am on my way to The Squid, pretending to be eloping with Peters who says he is going to meet me later at the Hôtel de la Paix, Rognerons. But in my compartment I have found a note, promising me a limousine from the station and asking me to wear a white rose so that the driver can identify me. I feel certain that the real destination of that machine is Avignon. So be sure to have local agents in plain clothes at Rognerons to follow the woman who gets off the evening train from Lyons. Tell them to keep out of sight and not interfere unless it is absolutely necessary."

Tardieu sighed as he finished translating, adding aloud:

"To think this only reaches me now, and that I failed her!"

"You couldn't help that," said Lepadou. "Evidently she was afraid to file the message openly, and if that infernal charwoman hadn't been a coward as well as a thief we'd never have received it at all."

"How do you make that out?"

"Why, she began by stealing both the message and the bank bill, but not being able to read the cipher she finally came to the conclusion that it was something official and got afraid to keep either."

The detective spoke deliberately, but his voice was as hard as steel as he turned to Peters and read both messages aloud.

"Now what have you got to say for yourself?"

"Nothing, sir, only that I went to the hotel she mentions and found she wasn't there."

"And so you came right back?"

"Yes, sir. As I say, I had an idea that she'd been making game of me. But I see now it might have been something even worse."

"But that note among the flowers. The automobile?"

"I swear, sir, I never heard of them till now. I sent her some flowers, but didn't say anything about her wearing them and there was nothing said about any

machine. We were to go to Rognerons, no farther."

"Where were you while Leontine's room was locked?"

"Taking a walk down by the quai, sir. When I got back the house was all in an uproar."

"Such confusion that nobody saw you, eh?"

"I don't know as to that. But——"

"Wait," interrupted Lepadou. "I want to have a look at those window fastenings myself."

The three men moved on to the room of the deceased lady's maid, and there to their surprise they found Balai engaged in the occupation commonly known as puttering around.

"I think I've solved the difficulty," announced the chief, shaking hands somewhat carelessly as Lepadou was made known to him. "The murderer got out and fastened one of the windows after him, just as I always knew he must have done. So perhaps we won't need any more foreign assistance."

"Shut it after him how?" Lepadou demanded.

"It's simple," explained the other. "This is the window here. The fastenings, you see, are operated by a single turn of the knob. A long bolt buried in the woodwork runs into a socket in the frame at the top, and another shoots into a socket in the sill at the bottom. But the lower bolt is too short to work, and

the upper one has its socket worn away—the metal thimble is gone. The window only *seems* to be locked. A good jerk will open it at any time.”

“And you think that the murderer drew it to behind him while he was standing on the balcony, and climbed down by the vines—in broad daylight with a crowd in the street?”

“He could have climbed down *under* the vines,” said Balai. “And here’s a tree which half hides the balcony itself. It was child’s play.”

“It would be no child’s play to shut the window from the outside with nothing to lay hold of it by,” objected the detective, attentively examining the bolts.

Balai smiled.

“Do you see this small round hole sunk into the putty of the sash? That’s where he stuck some sharp instrument, say an awl. It gave him plenty to take hold of.”

Slowly Lepadou’s face underwent a change. The look of impatience and incredulity with which he had at first listened to the chief’s explanations, disappeared.

“I’ve been mistaken,” he declared, approaching Peters with outstretched hand. “Appearances were against you, but this worn window-fastening lets you

out—as it undoubtedly let out the apache in the literal sense of the word.”

And turning to the other two, he continued:

“L’Estrange was probably right about Silva Jonquille, too. But for the moment my only object is to discover Clara Hope. She was evidently deceived by the window-fastening, and thought she was leading Peters on to betray a murder plot when she was only leading him to play the fool. And somebody, Tardieu, has taken advantage of the situation.”

“Whom do you mean by somebody?” inquired the judge, surprised and a little doubtful as he and the detective walked down the corridor together. “Can it be the man that Clara called The Squid?”

“The same. And he caught her away from home, alone, with her attention focussed—say upon Peters. The Squid slips the note she speaks of into her compartment, has her wear the white roses, and his limousine has taken her—where she guessed it would.”

“Then she must almost have run into you.”

“Yes, we were both in Avignon—at the same time, within a few blocks, perhaps within a few feet of each other. And now it may be too late. But I am going back.”

He was as good as his word, and the dawn of another day found him once again at the ancient city of

Popes. No time to waste in strategy now. The secret of the rue des Grottes—for there still his suspicions were centered—must be laid bare at once, by force if necessary. So he presented his credentials at the police *préfecture* and asked that a detachment of men in uniform be put under his orders.

The *préfect* proved to be an old friend from Paris days, who readily granted what was required. But force was unnecessary. The door beneath the dead vine was swinging open in the wind, revealing an empty room from which all vigilance had been withdrawn.

Lepadou rushed through the house, crossed a narrow open space at the back, and was standing at the foot of the Bluebeard tower. But here, too, was only emptiness—an open door giving upon a stone stairway. Mounting this he reached a circular apartment, the floor of which showed a gaping hole in the middle. The detective looked down, then drew back with a cry. Beneath him was a dark pit reaching apparently to the bottom of the tower. With no railing about the pit-mouth, it needed but night to convert it into an almost certain and deadly trap.

“You may go,” said the detective, returning to his men. “Everything is all right and I shan’t need you any more.”

"But you look as if you weren't feeling well," one of them ventured. "Better let us stay and help you."

"Nonsense! There's nothing to do. You report back at the *préfecture*. The party I was hoping to find has given me the slip, that's what's the matter with my looks."

"All the same, I don't like it," the other persisted to his companions when they had retreated as far as the first street corner. "He was well enough when we started out, and now you'd certainly say he had seen a ghost. What in the world can have happened?"

"I followed him upstairs," said a second member of the *possée*. "It's a mighty queer place. There's a room there with the floor only running around the edges of it. And believe me or not, when he caught sight of it he began to cry."

"Cry?"

"Yes, sir. I was right behind him and I heard him sob three or four times like a baby. So I came away before he had a chance to find out that he wasn't alone."

"Then I'm going back, orders or no orders," said the first speaker. "The rest of you stay here and wait for me."

This being agreed to, the man retraced his steps and

caught sight of Lepadou re-entering the tower door. But this time the detective did not ascend the stair. He poked about among the angles and cranies of the wall just within the entrance, found a huge stone slab which turned upon a pivot, and disappeared. The watcher following at his heels saw a sudden light flash from the obscurity ahead. Descending a long flight of steps to which the turning stone gave access, Lepadou had found it necessary to guide himself with a pocket-torch.

In spite of this precaution, he stumbled over something. It proved to be a spade, but he left it lying where it was and reached a sort of cellar totally without windows into which fell a few faint light rays from the well-hole far above. There was no flooring save the hard, time-molded earth, which, not having seen the sunlight for centuries, gave forth an indescribable odor of vague decay.

"Water—I'll have to find some water," muttered the detective, after he had examined the cellar-bottom inch by inch and on his hands and knees. "Beaten hard everywhere. A wonderfully good job."

With that he turned and hurried up the stairs.

But it was only a few minutes before his unseen companion, who had remained hidden in a niche, saw

him descending again, carrying a bucket of water.

This water Lepadou began to sprinkle copiously about the floor, where it rested in tiny puddles on the surface until the place looked as if it had been strewn with bits of broken glass which sparkled brightly as the light from the torch swept over them. Only in one spot did the water immediately sink into the earth.

Carefully marking the outlines of the spot, the detective secured the spade and set himself to digging—to the growing horror of the concealed observer, who whispered to himself:

“We oughtn’t to permit this. It begins to look as if he’d lost his mind. That’s sure a grave that he’s digging into, but if I stir he’ll probably lay me out with his spade.”

That it was a grave was soon beyond doubt. What else could have had that sinister, rectangular outline? But it was not deep, and at the end of ten minutes Lepadou was reaching down to remove the last bits of earth with his hands.

Curiosity overcame the prudence of the man in the niche, and he crept forward to look over the other’s shoulder. What he saw at first was an object of indistinguishable form which might have been almost any-

thing at all. But when the woman's cloak which covered it was slowly drawn aside and the rays of the torch directed more fully into the pit, it resolved itself into that from which one looked away after a single glance. And then the eye, recovering its courage, looked again and saw a figure which had once been sweet and tender that still wore a bunch of withered bridal roses pinned at its breast.

"Clara!" breathed the detective, falling flat on his face.

Minutes passed, and he lay so still that one might have thought that death again had entered that hideous chamber. Then suddenly he got to his feet, restored the grave with meticulous care to its original condition, and walked straight to where the well-intentioned but now frightened watcher was crouching.

"My assistant, Miss Hope, was decoyed here and murdered," he announced, in a voice the calm of which but served to accent the wild distortion of his features. "You followed me, which is all right—only be careful that you say nothing to anybody about what you've seen."

"But Captain, a dead body! I'll have to report it."

"You're under my orders. Say nothing to anybody, do you understand?"

The Ferret's tone grew quieter still as the purport of

his words became less and less rational, and he ended almost in a whisper:

“No infernal inquest is going to be held over *her* body—not while I’m alive. It’s man to man now. The law be damned.”

CHAPTER XIV

BAITING THE TRAP

GEORGES FRASQUE has never, like Paul Fort, been crowned king of Parisian poets, but he probably enjoys an even wider reputation. And that is because he is not only a poet but a journalist. Many call him the Don Marquis of Paris, and certainly his column in *La Nuit*, "*A Propos des Bottes*," is responsible for more chuckles of delight—to say nothing of laughter and heartfelt sighs—than almost anything else which circulates among the cafés of the capital between the hour of the *apéritif* and dinner.

Therefore when Fasque came out one evening with an article entitled, "*Do Parrots Think?*" the mere change in the headline attracted almost as much attention as a revolution. The article itself, purported to be the story of a parrot discovered in Avignon by a newsboy convalescing from a street accident, and told how the gamin and the bird, both lame, had learned to sympathize with and understand each other almost as if they belonged to the same species.

"And now comes a curious thing," the writer continued. "Coco, as the parrot is called, talks like any other of his kind, and is an incomparable mimic besides. He can take off the voice and even the manner of Le Squelette, his master, in a way which would ensure him a long run at any vaudeville house, while his imitation of such sounds as the ticking of a clock and the squeaking of a door-hinge is almost uncanny in its perfection. But Le Squelette, who claims that he found his pet right after it had been wounded by a fall—presumably in an attempt to escape from a cage hanging at a great distance from the ground, say in a tower—Le Squelette declares that all this is merely the superficial Coco. Deep down, he affirms, the bird has a serious purpose, a conscience—intelligence, in fine.

"'His ain't no common parrot talk,' says the boy. 'He knows what he is talkin' about. An' he's got somethin' on his mind he's tryin' to tell me. W'en I first got 'im he'd only squawk and jabber nonsense. But now's we're acquainted he imitates a woman screamin' sometimes in a way 'at's simply awful. An' he keeps harpin' on somethin' 'bout a devilfish. If I asks 'im w'at he means he'll just shake his head at me, as if it was too bad to tell. But every day he gets out a few more words, an' by an' by I expects to have his hist'ry all out of 'im, for him an' me is gettin' to be friends.'

"Is it possible that the boy is right? That Coco has something on his conscience which he is anxious to divulge, and is being held back, not for lack of the power of expression but by a motive which he has in common with us—the natural reluctance to confess any connection, past or present, with something sinister? Certainly his gradually increasing vocabulary, quite apart from what he is being taught by his new owner, is curious. His latest remark is:

"*'Ou ne faut qu'à baiser la bague.'* (I've only to kiss the ring.)

"What can it mean? In the near future I hope to be able to relate yet other of Coco's accomplishments to my readers, as the bird's growing intimacy with the boy leads to an increased confidence between the two. Perhaps we are on the verge of an interesting discovery, of which the police—or I should say the Academy of Sciences—might well take note."

Upon reading this, many complained that Frasque was growing too fanciful and needed a vacation. Others shook their heads, declaring that there must be something back of it. That talk of a woman's screams hardly sounded like a joke, while the pretended mistake of naming the police instead of the Academy of Sciences had an unpleasant suggestiveness. But most people merely laughed, determined not to be

taken in by what they considered a piece of deliberate mystification.

A few days later, the following advertisement appeared in an obscure corner of the same journal:

"For Sale—The famous thinking parrot, Coco. Call in person after eight p.m. Only purchasers who can promise bird good care.— Le Squelette, 115 bis, Rue Monge.

"Some fakir is trying to take advantage of the publicity which the real Coco has received," said the wiseacres.

But in a back room at the address named, where two men and a boy were grouped about a copy of the sheet, the ad was taken more seriously.

"After what my old friend Frasque has done for us, it ought to bring something to light," one of the men was saying. "His hint that the parrot was divulging something new every day was a master-stroke. Besides, I've an idea that the owner of the bird is fond of him. We'll have a caller before the evening is over. What's more," he added whimsically, "I'll be much surprised if he isn't dressed like an electrician out of work."

Lepadou—for it was he who spoke—had come back to Paris and forced himself to take up the case where he had dropped it, notwithstanding his dreadful find

in the tower at Avignon. Official inquiries in regard to that incident were of course on foot, but he had succeeded in hushing them up—for the time being, at least.

Outwardly he was not unlike the boyish Ferret of other days, and had he appeared in New York acquaintances would probably have hailed him with the conventional assurance that he hadn't changed a bit. But they would have been wrong. It was no longer a mere desire to bring out the truth which moved him. His whole soul was seared with hatred, with a longing for revenge. The quiet of his manner, the smile that occasionally played about the corners of his lips, bespoke but the deceptive quiet of a mine of high explosives and much resembled the glint of a ray of sunlight on the metal detonating cap.

Having learned from Tardieu that Peters and the Grangers were still at the house on the boulevard St. Germain; that l'Estrange had been permitted to return to Rome, and that Julien Ferrard continued to languish in a cell pending some outcome of the slow-dragging police investigation, the detective had decided to begin at the beginning—to see what could be done to lift the shadows still surrounding the *bal des Tapettes* before inquiring further into subsequent and still darker events.

Particularly did he examine the three pieces of the *miséricorde* which Tardieu one day put into his hands.

"What strikes you as most peculiar about this weapon?" he asked the judge.

"It's coming apart both at the point and at the hilt," was the prompt answer.

"Yes, that's unusual enough. But what is most suggestive to me is the extreme narrowness of the blade."

"Suggestive of what?"

"Of the possibility that both you and Balai have let yourselves fall into an error. But never mind that, as I may be wrong. Where is the assailant's costume?"

"Here." The judge took the remnants of the squid mask from a drawer and flung them upon the table—for he was sitting in his *cabinet d'instruction*—and had all the exhibits at hand.

Lepadou remarked upon the completeness of the disguise, then exclaimed:

"Good! Just as I thought. Did you notice these pieces of metal?"

He pointed to a very simple frame-work which seemed to have acted as a nucleus for the strengthening cords running the length of the frail rubber tentacles.

"I noticed them, of course," said the judge.

"Of course. Yet neither you nor the chief nor any of your experts saw anything significant about them."

"Do you?"

"The arrangement, or what is left of it, strikes me as—but let's go take a look at the building where the ball was held."

It being still afternoon, the Bouiller was deserted save for a few employees engaged in cleaning up for the regular night's custom. Lepadou was shown the exact spot where Rougette Picot had fallen; the position of the no-longer existent pavilion, and of the ante-room where the *enquête* had been held.

"How was the place lighted?" he asked.

Tardieu was able to give only a general description of the arrangement of the various bulbs and globes. He knew nothing about the wiring save that the colored lights seemed to have been on a circuit of their own. Lepadou ordered a ladder, and spent considerable time crawling from one place to another on the open beam-work.

"If I'd only been here!" he sighed as he descended, brushing the dust from his clothes. "Do you know who had charge of the illumination? I mean the man who superintended the placing of the extra lights which were used for the occasion?"

The judge did not, but inquiry of the management

revealed the fact that the work had been done by a contractor in a small way known as Amic Sautel, who got the job by largely underbidding all competitors.

Several days were wasted in a vain attempt to locate Sautel. Men were found who knew him, but he had closed up his place of business and where he lived nobody seemed able to say. Finally, however, an individual was located who declared that he had helped Sautel on the *bal des Tapettes* job. There was, he said, nothing funny or extraordinary about it so far as he had noticed, but he would know Sautel anywhere as he was an old man with a closely cropped white beard, remarkably nimble when climbing a pole or working on a scaffolding, but noticeably feeble when walking on the ground with no necessity for exerting his waning strength. Lepadou took his informant (a common lineman) into his following at liberal wages, and from that moment refused to stir without him.

His next move was to make the acquaintance of the director of the *Jardin des Plantes* and to become familiar with all the details of its famous museum—a large building of red and yellow brick dedicated to the immortal Buffon. One would have said that he was preparing a treatise, so carefully did he go over the building, studying a great collection of stuffed birds which had recently been installed. The exhibits were

so arranged as to display the natural habits and environment of the various species, and at his suggestion a number of cages were added containing living specimens. Among these, Coco, the thinking parrot, shortly found a place.

That day Le Squelette's advertisement was published. The early part of it had been spent by the tenants of the rue Monge apartment in boring holes in a pair of folding doors which separated their back room from the reception parlor—holes scarcely visible on the front side, yet widening so as to command a clear view from the other. With the coming of night-fall, Lepadou and his house-mates, with Tardieu and the linemen for guests, sat down to wait. Any time after eight o'clock an answer to the advertisement might be expected.

"But what makes you think he'll come disguised as Sautel?" asked the judge.

"Because," answered Lepadou, "it's a good disguise—and one he won't suspect we've ever heard of. Squelette, what are you doing?"

"Boss," responded the urchin, who had been employing the interval in carefully bandaging his left hand with a rather dirty rag, "didn't yeh tell me I was to *play* wid dis gent who's comin' here after de bird?"

"Yes, but what's the bandage for?"

"It's an idea, dat's all. If I'm goin' to play 'im I've got to have somethin' to play 'im *with*."

That was all he would divulge, and slowly the minutes from eight to nine dragged themselves along. Then there was a ring. Lepadou and his companions placed themselves behind the spy-holes. Le Squelette, assuming all the physical infirmities with which Frasque in his article had seen fit to endow him, made for the front door.

"Come awn in," he was heard to say. "I mustn't stand talkin' out here, mister. De doctor t'inks I ain't well yet, an' I dasn't run no risk from de night air."

Somewhat reluctantly the caller entered. He was a man apparently beyond middle age, who moved slowly and wore a well-trimmed beard, noticeably gray.

"It's him!" whispered the lineman excitedly, drawing back from his post of observation and touching his employer's elbow. "It's Amic Sautel. Now what the——"

The detective nodded without any show of surprise. Sautel, on the other side of the door, refused a chair.

"I've come to make you an offer for your bird," he began. "That is, if he's the same Coco I've been readin' about in the papers. But what's the matter? Are you sick?"

"Didn't you read dat I was hoit?"

"Oh, yes, in an automobile accident. I've got a little boy who is sick, too. I want the parrot for him to play with. But it's got to be genuine and no fake. Let's see him."

"See Coco?"

"Of course—and tell me what you want for him. Look here, ain't you bright?"

Sautel was seen to cast a suspicious look about the room, but Le Squelette broke into uproarious laughter.

"Yer as good as de doctor."

"The doctor?"

"Yeh. De doc says to me, says he: 'Boy, de automobile what hit yeh in de head must a cracked some of de works, an' I ain't sure yet but what it might better have cracked yeh altogether. Lucky for you, yeh seem cheerful about it. But I wish yeh'd stow dat funny laugh. It makes me t'ink of de cracklin' ob thorns under a pot.' Dat's what he says. An' now you goes an' says de same t'ing. I *ain't* bright, an' I ain't never goin' to be bright. Dat's why I loses me job an' hasn't got nothin' but dis here parrot to live on besides a little I'd saved up, and dat's most gone."

"So, you've lost your job?"

The visitor sat down, as if he had found a subject which interested him.

"That's too bad. The paper didn't say anything about your bein' cracked—but of course it *wouldn't*. What did you used to do? And how do you come to be livin' in as nice a place as this? You can't be alone."

"Course not!" The gamin laughed again. "Course I don't live alone. A couple of nice ladies saw dat piece in de paper an' went an' found out from de man what wrote it where I was. Den they hunted me up an' brought me here to be charitable with. I'll call 'em an' you can see——"

"No, don't bother. I want to talk to *you*. About the parrot, now, and your job?"

"I was workin' in Avignon," declared Le Squelette, with a sudden air of importance so well assumed that Lepadou, watching and listening, was moved to grin in spite of his troubles. "An' I was workin'," continued the boy, "for the greatest 'tective in de world. But I ain't goin' to tell yeh his name, 'cause if I did he might come an' make it worse for me. He was goin' to take me back to 'Merica wid him. But I runned away after I got out of de hospital, an' didn't talk to most nobody till dat writin' man saw me wit de bird out in the park an' got me to show him off. It's all true, w'at he says in de paper, only he ain't got it half down. But I didn't want to say no more for fear my

old boss'd read it an' git sore an' come an' beat me for not bein' bright no more. He might make me work again, too, an' I don't want to work now I can live here doin' nothin'."

"But you did want to keep the parrot?"

"Not much I didn't. He went bad and bit me—after I'd stolen 'im with me out of de hospital."

Le Squelette held up his bandaged hand in proof—and again Lepadou was forced to admire from his hiding-place. If this was the boy when he wasn't bright, he felt that he'd hate to run counter to him when he was.

"He went bad," continued the supposed idiot, "an' begun to talk things what made me afraid of 'im. So I says to myself, I'll advertise an' sell 'im wit'out sayin' nothin' to the ladies, who'll be glad to get rid of 'im anyway. An' I ain't let either of 'em see de paper I put de notice in, for fear dey'd t'ink it wasn't right to sell somet'in' I'd found an' hadn't bought and paid for. Dey's awful particular 'bout such things. But——"

"Never mind. Bring this bird out and I'll pay you a good price for him—enough to buy lots of candy, if that's what you like."

"Candy? You bet!"

"Well," cried the man, growing impatient. "What do you stand there grinning for? Bring me the bird."

The boy answered with a roar of amusement.

"How kin I?" he choked. "Bring him out—dat's a good one! You're some joker, mister. Only go easy wid me. My head is beginnin' to hurt an' I'm afraid I'm goin' to fall down, as I do sometimes these days, because de room keeps goin' 'round an' 'round. Do you notice it?"

"No; why can't you bring him out? Come, boy! Don't get excited. See! Here's some money I've brought you. Bright new money. Let's have a talk with the pretty bird, and then I'll take him away where he can't hurt you any more."

"*Him* hurt me?" Le Squelette's voice grew indignant. "I'd like to see him hurt anybody now. He's in jail."

"Jail?"

"Yeh, in de bird jail. A man was in dis afternoon. Said he couldn't wait till eight an' took de chance of not findin' me home."

"Yes, yes. What did he say?"

"He told me dat Coco was a lit'rary as well as a ornigh-logical curios'ty now, an' dat dey wanted 'im to take an' lock up an' show 'im off. Here's de money he give me w'en I give 'im de bird."

Le Squelette showed a considerable roll of bills. The stranger sprang to his feet.

"What man was it, boy?" he demanded, controlling

himself with an effort. "Think! He was from some museum, wasn't he?"

"Yeh, a museum is w'at he said."

"But what museum? They don't lock birds up very carefully in all museums, and he might get loose and come and bite you again. Besides, I shouldn't be surprised from what I hear about him if Coco wasn't a bird at all, but something worse—do you know what I mean?"

"*Do I?*" The boy shrank back into a corner, holding his hands before his face in an attitude of sudden fright. "How did you guess it? Of course he ain't a bird, he's a witch. An' he's gone to de big yellow an' red brick buildin' in de gardens right near here. De man told me all about it, 'cause he thought I wanted to be sure Coco was goin' to be took good care of."

"He won't be," declared the other. "He'll get out. Have you got all the money that was promised you? Maybe if you was to tell them that I was the original owner they'd send him back. You had no right to sell him, now had you, when he wasn't your own?"

"Dat's all right. I told all dat to de man who bought him, an' he says if de real owner turns up he can come to de museum. But I guess de only way for him to get de bird back would be to steal him, for dey sets a lot of store by Coco, them scientific fellows does."

Sautel, as if moved by a sudden suggestion, handed the boy five francs and said he was sorry that he'd come too late, but that after all the parrot didn't matter. He could buy some other pet for his own little boy—one that wasn't so savage.

"In fact, I've had a narrow escape in not getting him this devil who bites," he added at parting. "You've been frank and told me, when you might have kept it to yourself. That's what the five francs is for. But if you don't want things to come and bite you in your sleep, you won't say a word to anybody about my having been here. I'm something of a witch myself."

With that, he left. And as he went, a figure detached itself from the shadows on the other side of the street and followed silently in his wake.

CHAPTER XV

WITHIN THE TENTACLES

THE night-watchman at the Natural History Museum in the *Jardin des Plantes* had his instructions. He was not to be unsociable if a stranger should happen along and try to engage him in conversation. Indeed, it had been impressed upon him that such a stranger's whims were to be humored. But on the night of Le Squelette's interview with the would-be parrot buyer, no tempter appeared to offer the watchman so much as a glass of beer.

At about eleven o'clock of the night following, however, as he was pacing up and down before the museum's front entrance, a figure came staggering down the rue de Buffon, halted, and in a voice tremulous with hiccoughs demanded to know the hour. The stranger was in evening dress, half concealed by an automobile overcoat, and wore a visored cap and goggles which amounted practically to a mask. When his question had been politely answered, he drew out an

enormous roll of bills and tried to give his informant a sum suggesting one of those absurdly generous tips with which inexperienced American tourists not infrequently paralyze the friendly service of the continent.

The watchman, forgetting his instructions and believing for a moment that he had to do with a genuine case of drunkenness, refused the money with some heat, declaring that he wasn't in the habit of being paid for simple courtesies even when they were rendered to those who ought to be in bed and asleep instead of wandering about the streets making fools of themselves. But as the stranger insisted, protesting that no offense was meant and hinting that the only way to wipe out the misunderstanding now was for the two of them to set forth together in search of liquid refreshment, the watchman suddenly remembered orders and permitted his objections to be overcome.

The man in goggles, marching ahead, turned towards a maze of dimly lighted alleys.

"Bully wine-shop arou' here shommers," he threw over his shoulder in thick-tongued French. "Don' know where 'sh gone, b' you 'n me 'sh got to find it."

"He's leading me to where he thinks I'll be tempted to rob him," reflected the watchman. "And then, when I've got the swag, he thinks I'll make myself scarce for the rest of the night."

It looked like a funny thing to do, but he had been told to help carry out any plans the fellow might seem to have. So he stepped up close, prepared to put this program into execution. Immediately the other whirled around, his drunkenness gone as if by magic. That was all the watchman knew until he woke up in a hospital the next morning and was told by the nurse in charge that he had suffered a severe concussion of the brain and mustn't talk.

While this little drama was being enacted in the streets, a number of men were within the museum waiting to see what might happen there. They were Lepadou, Tardieu, Balai, Le Squelette and a couple of inspectors. Each was behind some sort of screen in the *grande salle*, keeping watch without lights, conversation or even the solace of tobacco; and as the hours slipped by their vigil seemed to take on an eternal character, as such vigils sometimes do.

In the *salle* itself nothing at first sight appeared to have been changed, though the public which had thronged the broad floor-space only a few hours before, admiring the feathered occupants of the gilded cages or gaping in front of the exhibition-cases filled with specimens of the taxidermist's art, would doubtless have found it all strange and uncanny in such a ghostly

sort of illumination as that which stole in through the windows from the street.

They would have noted, too, upon closer inspection, that at least one considerable exhibit had been added since the closing hour. It was an aquarium tank occupying the very center of the huge, lofty-ceilinged apartment. And its liquid contents, catching the gleam of the distant street-lamps, sparkled uneasily, as if the water had not yet had time to sink to rest—or perhaps was slightly stirred now and then by some slumbering aquatic creature, half dormant, half inclined to awaken thoroughly and spring upon some bit of real or imagined prey.

Shortly after midnight there was a sound to be heard at one of the entrance doors, and a few seconds later the door swung open and closed again. That was all. Silence and emptiness seemed once more to have settled down over the breathless interior of the great museum.

Then a parrot spoke from a cage hanging high overhead:

“Prenez garde! Le Sèche! Le Sèche! Aie!”

The last syllable was a shrill and piercing scream, so human that it seemed hardly possible that it could have proceeded from the throat of a bird. It woke up several ravens in a large wire pen in one corner, to

croak a confused fugue of indignant protests before fidgeting themselves back to repose. After that, silence once more for the space of several minutes, at the end of which the figure of a man emerged from the obscurity of the doorway and advanced slowly and cautiously towards the center of the room.

He wore a cap and goggles, and was evidently looking for something in particular, for he groped his way from cage to cage, from case to case, peering within each and finally beginning to whistle softly, as if to himself.

He was answered by the parrot, who gave voice to a soft, musical note followed by a flute-like burst of runs and arpeggios delivered with that incredible accuracy which certain gifted individuals of the species sometimes attain.

"Coco!" called the man softly. "Coco!"

"Ici—here. Le Sèche! Aie!"

"Petite gamine!" the man chuckled. "What am I going to do with you? Hung up there as high as Haaman! You've been talking too much. I hate to wring your neck, but I suppose I must. Anyway I'll have to find a ladder and help you down."

It chanced that there was a ladder lying at that very moment near the aquarium tank. The intruder, feeling his way, finally caught sight of it. But as he

stooped, something stirred within the tank and a long, tentacle-like thing slipped over the edge, fastening itself about his neck with a deadly tenacity which nothing could shake off.

A shriek, this time undeniably human, cut through the silence, followed by confused groans, curses, and the sounds of a man fighting desperately for his life. But nothing sufficed to retard the gray, almost shapeless bulk which was lifting itself from the water and wrapping its limbs with ever more crushing force about its victim.

"It's a nightmare!" screamed the man. "It's the devil in my own heart. I must wake up. No, no! It's real. *Mon dieu!* I must kill it. I——"

The monster in the tank was now entirely out upon the floor, and the other, unable any longer to maintain his balance with all those snaky arms writhing about him, slipped and fell at the very moment when he was attempting to draw a knife. There was the sharp click of metal upon metal, then another. He lay on his back, helpless, both his hands and his feet locked together with fetters which had come as if by miracle out of nowhere.

The aquatic creature released its hold. In that grim twilight it had every appearance of a giant squid. But it was assuming an upright position and removing—

first its helmet-like head, then its tentacles. At the same moment the *salle* was flooded with electric light, revealing Forgeron standing in the midst of a collapsed rubber diving-suit and wiping the perspiration from his forehead with a clean white handkerchief.

"Good thing you left the job to me," he remarked to Lepadou, who now stepped forward. "You'd never have kept from stranglin' him, as I wanted to myself when once I got my hands on the beast."

The beast—or more properly the man in fetters—had ceased both his cries and struggles. But now, catching sight of the steel bands which showed that his enemy had been as little a dream as he had been a devilfish, he broke out in a torrent of imprecations. They were no longer the words of one in terror, but the half-articulate mouthings of a fit of madness. He beat himself with his manacled fists, raised himself to a sitting posture, then threw his whole body violently back upon the floor, while a line of white foam gathered about his lips.

"I killed them all," he repeated thickly. "Rougette, Leontine, Clara Hope! Oh, if Lepadou could only have seen what I did to the last one!"

Forgeron, Balai and Tardieu were forced to unite their efforts to hold back the detective, who at the mention of Clara had tried to fling himself bodily upon

the prisoner. But gradually the latter's fit subsided, and a quiet voice rose upon the stillness:

"*M'sieu le chef*, if you are a gentleman you will take this *chaplet de Saint François* off of my wrists. The idea of handcuffing me! What do you think I am? A common thief?"

His intonation as he repeated this old euphemism for what an Englishman would have called "the derbies," was cold and ironical. Lepadou regained his self-control with a sudden drawing back of the shoulders, and answered in the same tone:

"In due time, Marle. But if you've got anything to say you might as well say it where you are. I suppose you're ready to admit that you *are* Marle? And also Le Caillou, the electrician who arranged the wiring for the *bal des Tapettes*, the——"

"Oh, willingly, and a good many more. The driver of a certain limousine at Rognerons, for instance."

"Stick to the Rougette Picot case. You might as well make a clean breast of your motive, now that the jig is up."

"What makes you think so? Don't you remember the Boncœur affair? I suppose you thought the jig was up then."

"I remember. But it really is, this time. Are you going to come through?"

"Why not? If I could explain it to you I would. But it's so difficult to make a normal man understand anything out of the ordinary, full as history is of the Great Exceptions. Did you ever hear of a surgeon known as Dr. Bennet?"

"There was a Dr. Bennet, an American with the Foreign Legion during the war," broke in chief Balai. "A perfectly wonderful physician."

"That's the man, only his real name wasn't Bennet and he wasn't especially devoted to the American cause—or any other cause, for that matter, excepting that of science. Bennet was my first alias. I adopted it because I'd even then begun to suspect that I was a little—well, peculiar. I made a reputation during the war, and it wasn't my fault that the supply of anesthetics ran short. But that's how I learned my peculiarity—that the sight of suffering gave me pleasure."

"An insane man!" gasped Balai, drawing farther away.

"*Pardon, m'sieu le chef*, but insanity is only a word. You enjoy seeing Ophelia brought in dead on the stage. I prefer to see her die in reality. The spectacle gratifies the same instinct in each of us, only yours is weaker. What was the Marquis de Sade, Caligula, Nero, Atilla—what were they all driving at do you suppose? Did you never throw stones at a frog when you were a boy

for the sense of power and superiority it gave you? Didn't we once burn witches in my little town of Salem, Mass.? It's in my blood. My grandfather was a vivisectionist. I am a great surgeon. Lepadou, here, calls me The Squid, but that didn't prevent him from frightening me into a fit. I tell you, cruelty is the oldest amusement of the race. Now when I killed Clara Hope——"

"You did not kill Clara Hope!"

Everybody started, and all heads turned as a woman, stepping out from behind a group of mounted flamin-goes, advanced towards the prisoner.

"Look at me," she continued. "I am Clara Hope, and I am wearing the same kind of roses that I wore that night in the tower. Look close! Don't you recognize me, Peters?"

"No, no! You can't be."

"And you are not Peters?"

"Yes, I am Peters, if that is any good to you. But I saw Clara Hope lying dead at the bottom of the shaft."

"It was rather dark, that night in the tower," said Clara, coldly. "You had only a lantern. What you saw was a woman wearing a veil and a bunch of roses. When you held up your lantern the light shone in your

face. She saw her worst fears realized—and jumped.”

“If it wasn’t Clara Hope, who was it?”

“Silva Jonquille.”

“Well, well!” The Squid looked thoughtfully down at his manacled hands. “I planned to add her to my collection, but somehow I always backed out when the pinch came. I don’t know why, but——”

“I can tell you,” Clara put in. “She was your sister.”

“Impossible! I never saw my sister after she was a little girl, but—no, no! It can’t be.”

“Nevertheless, it is. I found my way down to her after you had left. She was still able to speak, and she told me how she had recognized you. Tear his disguise off, somebody, and make the acquaintance of Dr. Marx.”

Willing hands complied, and there was revealed a smooth-shaven face and a closely-cropped head of bright red hair.

“I should have known!” muttered the accused, paying no attention to this indignity. “I hadn’t seen her since she was a child, but she had that skill in using the hands which runs in our family. We are all born surgeons. Told me once, too, that she was fond of parrots—another hereditary trait. I see now why I couldn’t bear to stay in the tower, even long enough

to bury her. And when I went back and couldn't find the body—well, I've been rather rattled and careless of what I did ever since.

“But you needn't look so triumphant, Lepadou. The Squid wasn't made to be *your* meat. You'll never solve this mystery. I've told you that I killed them all, and yet you know that the Picot woman was stabbed by her dancing-partner—*while I was sitting by Silva's side in a pavilion box*. How are you going to get around that?”

As he put the question, he lifted his hands to his lips and bit savagely at a jewel which sparkled on one of his fingers. The next instant he had fallen forward on the floor.

“He had only to kiss the ring,” said Lepadou, repeating a saying—no longer mysterious—of the parrot. “Look! The bezel is on a hinge—a little poison-box, made, I should say, in the time of the Borgias. But it's empty now. Shall we go?”

CHAPTER XVI

ALL JOURNEYS END

An Extract from the Notebook of Judge Tardieu

THE SQUID's confession was far from ending the Rougette Picot case, so far as I was concerned, for not only was it contradicted by the evidence against the girl's dancing-partner but there remained to my mind something simply preposterous in his claim that he had sat with Silva Jonquille during the ball. He might be Peters, I reasoned—though for the life of me I couldn't see how—but to admit that he could also be l'Estrange was altogether too much.

If I ever write my memoirs I shall have to confess that all my life I've been more or less a prisoner to my likes and dislikes. And if this be disgraceful in a magistrate, why then I stand disgraced and care very little who knows it. Certainly, too, I proved to be strangely right even in the very act of being wrong.

As to The Squid's other alleged impersonations, they

seemed less incredible. Dr. Bennet, Marle, Le Caillou, Sautel—they had moved in widely different circles. But hadn't l'Estrange on the very day of Lepadou's arrival sent Peters into the studio to be questioned—just a few minutes after he himself had left it? Could it be that both were characters created by the same actor?

"It's impossible," I said to Lepadou—or McClue as perhaps I should begin to call him—as we left the museum together. "He'll be here in a few days to show us how absurd the supposition is."

"Who, l'Estrange? I'm going to his place right now. Send for everybody concerned, will you? It can be settled tonight."

I despatched a couple of *agents* in response to his request, and we continued our way towards the faubourg St. Germain on foot, the detective engaging Balai in a heated discussion concerning the effectiveness of disguise.

"It's never been of much use in the Department," the chief contended.

To which McClue replied:

"That's because policemen are not sufficiently clever. They aren't paid to be. But every day disguises are used *against* them—otherwise there wouldn't remain so many undetected crimes."

And he continued by outlining a system of gymnastics of his own, whereby he claimed to have acquired an almost perfect control of the facial muscles and to a great extent of all other superficial characteristics which commonly pass as the index of identity.

"But you don't admit," I suggested, drawing him aside, "that l'Estrange could have fooled you by trying to pass himself off as the butler?"

"He *tried* to fool me, certainly," was the astonishing rejoinder. "But I recognized him by the lobes of his ears—a little detail which he had n't had time to alter."

"You might as well say he was Ferrard, and be done with it."

"No, but he was undoubtedly the author of the crime known as 'the phantom-dagger suicide,' which you've told me Miss Jonquille was overheard to mention. It wasn't a suicide, and l'Estrange himself sent her the writing-desk with the secret drawer which she supposed came from her old lover. That's how he was able to get hold of the *miséricorde* when he wanted it. As for Peters—*see if we find him at the house to-night.*"

Evidently no aid or comfort was to be had from McClue, and yet I continued to hug my illusion—depend-

ing chiefly now upon Clara's wrist watch for Peters, and upon blind faith for l'Estrange. And essentially I was right, as I've said, though heaven knows I was mistaken enough in detail and little prepared for the surprises which the night still had in store.

Pa Granger let us in, much astonished to see us at such an hour. With Miss Hope, Forgeron and Le Squelette (with his parrot) following at our heels, we were a company calculated to awaken astonishment at any time. But nobody had gone to bed and we found Mrs. Granger sitting in the studio with Millie on the floor at her feet—the girl asleep like a child, her head in her mother's lap. The ornamental logs in the big fireplace had been lighted, no doubt less for warmth than for cheerfulness, for Peters had indeed disappeared and it was easy to see that the stoical courage even of Mrs. Granger was nearing an end.

She started as she saw us enter, then settled back with a look of relief. Even to me, who knew that the evil spirit which—no matter how many forms it might or might not have assumed—had certainly been haunting that house would never again return—even to me the place seemed filled with unnatural presences. One doesn't believe in ghosts. Of course not. Nevertheless one is sensitive to unexpected sights and sounds in sur-

roundings where ghosts, if there were such things, would have a particular right to be.

But it was necessary for me to think of my duties, and as soon as my clerk arrived I established myself behind a table and assumed that cloak of omniscient dignity with which custom requires a magistrate to cover his human frailty before presuming to inquire into the delinquencies of his fellow beings.

"We will begin with the *bal des Tapettes*," I announced. "A man who went by many names has confessed to murdering various women to gratify a sort of mania. But that doesn't help us in the case of Rougette Picot, since we're all agreed that she was stabbed by her dancing-partner."

"Pardon me, Your Honor," said McClue, who with Balai was now seated at my table. "But if we all agree, what's in question?"

"Why, his identity. The chief thinks it was Ferrard. What do *you* say?"

"That I'd like to hear his reasons for thinking so." Balai needed no second invitation.

"In the first place," he said, "Ferrard, as the Jonquille woman's friend, had easy access to the *miséricorde*. And in the second, the hilt was found in his possession."

"And in the third," supplemented the detective, "I suppose you think he turned himself into the devilfish that appeared in the tableau and the dance?"

"Certainly. It was no more difficult for him to crawl into a costume than it was for Forgeron to crawl into one tonight."

McClue shook his head.

"If you and the judge had examined the costume found at the Bouiller—examined it carefully, that is—you'd have seen that it could never have contained even a boy, much less a man."

"Then what did it contain?" I asked in astonishment.

"Nothing, Judge."

"Nothing?"

"No; it was a dummy. You haven't kept up with the progress of science, I'm afraid, and so have no idea of the extreme simplicity of modern mechanism. If it had been one of those complicated dancing dolls of the Middle-Ages, you'd have recognized it at once. But an automaton operated by wireless had nothing, at least in the wreck of it, even to suggest machinery either to you or the chief. So you searched for the woman's dancing-partner. I hunted for the traces of the Lyden jars and other apparatus for the generation of Hertzian waves that had been hidden behind the

decorations of the Bouiller rafters. I found only brackets and screw-holes, but their arrangement was conclusive."

So that was why he had been so unaccountably interested in electricity and electricians! But for a moment I couldn't credit his deductions. Of course I had known that there was such a thing as the wireless transmission of energy, and that it was allied to wireless telegraphy and to radio. But I'd had no conception of its practical importance, notwithstanding the number of articles which have appeared in the newspapers describing dirigible torpedoes and other contrivances set in motion and controlled from a distance. It is truly amazing, the slight amount of attention which one pays to subjects in which one is not particularly interested.

McClue, nettled I dare say by our first incredulity, rubbed in his lesson until I shall never be able to forget that wireless power acts by exciting electro-magnets (if I have it right) much as nerve force excites and contracts our muscles; and that these magnets, so simple looking in themselves, are protected in some way from all ether waves excepting those of a certain length. This enables the operator to single them out as easily as the brain of the pianist singles out the different fingers of the hand. But the purely technical

details are beyond me. When language begins to bristle with words like *inductances* and *capacities* I am affected much as a layman, I imagine, is affected by our legal jargon.

"The dummy squid made very few motions from all accounts," McClue went on, returning finally to the vernacular. "It could easily have been manipulated by half a dozen levers fastened under the edge of a box-seat in the pavilion. But the operator had time to remove them and to recover most of his automaton before you gentlemen finished your preliminary examination of the victim's body.

"Rougette," he continued, "must have known that she was dancing with a mechanism. But she took great pains to pass it off as an actual person—by talking to it. From her reported remarks I should judge that she had entered into a wager that she would make Miss Jonquille think it was Ferrard. That's why she used the word '*bet*,' which was reported by so many of the witnesses. She couldn't have reckoned on being overheard; but being a person of little invention, when she wanted to be seen talking she naturally spoke of the thing which was uppermost in her mind."

"You haven't explained the knife-wound," objected Balai, clutching at the disappearing remnants of his prestige.

"It was made," said McClue, "by the detached point of the *miséricorde* shot by a spring from the dummy's mouth. The rest of the blade was dropped on the floor to give you a clue, and the hilt was returned to Silva's apartment so that our criminal could enjoy the voluptuous spectacle of a woman in imminent danger of being guillotined. If the blade had happened to be wider the wound would have shown you that it had never been used."

This disposed of the Rougette Picot affair, and of Julien so far as that was concerned. But as I sat there surrounded by those four walls with their marvels of art smiling down upon me, I was totally dissatisfied. L'Estrange, so glibly spoken of as a criminal, had been my admiration, my friend, and I couldn't imagine him as a gloating, homicidal maniac.

Moreover Julien, though evidently free from the guilt of murder, certainly had something to explain. I had examined him several times since he had been taken into custody, and he had refused to answer questions. What had he been up to while playing the vandal among l'Estrange's pictures—he and Flamand Bec, who also chose to remain mute in the cell where he lay confined?

At this point, the officers I had sent to bring in the

prisoners appeared with their charges, and McClue as if reading my thought leaned towards me to observe:

"What is worrying you, Judge, is the necessity in which you find yourself of thinking ill of a deceased genius. Do you usually find them so moral—here in France?"

"Not all of them," I admitted. "But l'Estrange's talent was of a particularly kindly sort. It is impossible for me to understand how the author of such pictures——"

"Wait. I think that Ferrard will have something to tell us as soon as he learns what has happened."

Bluntly the detective addressed the foremost prisoner, informing him of Silva's fate. Ferrard showed decent concern, not unmixed with relief.

"Horrible!" he murmured. "But it might have been worse."

"Did you think she was guilty?" demanded McClue.

"I was afraid so. That's why I wouldn't talk. Even yet I don't understand what she was doing in Avignon."

"Nor do I, altogether."

As he said this McClue glanced in Clara Hope's direction, and it suddenly occurred to me that it was the first time I had seen him so much as acknowledge her existence since her unexpected appearance beside

the aquarium tank. But he went on at once to ask Julien what he had been doing with turpentine to the pictures, and I had to give all my attention to the answer:

“There was a quality in l'Estrange's work which reminded me of somebody else's—a certain touch, an almost uncanny feeling and sympathy for the seamy side of things.”

“You mean,” I cried, unable to contain myself, “that you thought it possible that they were not his? You were looking for a hidden signature?”

“Exactly, *m'sieu le juge*. I got it into my head that l'Estrange might have employed what we call a ‘ghost.’ ”

“And did you find one?”

“I found a signature—that of a man I knew in my youngest student days. He was expected to do great things, but suddenly took to absinthe and disappeared—from *my* sight, at least. I haven't met him for years.”

“Look, Julien!”

Flamand Bec, who had been huddling in the background, now stepped forward, repeating a name which I dimly remembered having heard in the not-so-distant past which young men call the long ago. Ferrard grasped him by the hand.

"*You!* The man in the next cell to mine, and I never recognized you."

"I have changed, Julien. The 'green muse,' you know."

"But how did you ever get into such a fix?"

"That devil of a l'Estrange discovered a little slip that I'd made, and drove me like a slave. Thank God, they tell me he is dead."

"And you hid your signature at the bottom of every canvas?"

"Yes, for proof if the day should ever come. But I couldn't fight. My ruin would have involved somebody besides myself."

"You did, though. Wasn't it you that started to cut up the pictures?"

"Yes, but I had no plan. The sight of my own works winning success after success for another man eventually drove me beyond myself, that was all. One night I came here intending to slash them all to pieces. I was prevented. But I managed afterwards to get at 'The Struggle of Innocence.' It had been copied as the stage-setting for the murder of a woman I loved. That was too much, even if she *was* only an artists' model."

Such was Bec's story. The sublime artist whom I had admired so much was in reality not my wealthy

acquaintance of the faubourg St. Germain, but this poor devil whom dissipation had already doomed. The knowledge came as a shock and at the same time as a relief—for after all it is better that genius should be miserable than infamous.

But we were not there to ponder over the mysteries of art, and—as Balai soon took occasion to remind me—the finding of the hilt in Ferrard's effects had yet to be accounted for. The young man himself protested complete ignorance. McClue's explanation of the separate use of the point stopped short at that. We needed to know every hand that had touched that fatal *miséricorde* from the time it left its hiding-place.

"It was probably," suggested McClue, "returned to Miss Jonquille's desk by l'Estrange the morning after the ball. He paid her a call."

"On the other hand," insisted Balai, "the prisoner, Ferrard, may have furnished l'Estrange with the blade and have kept the hilt in hopes of selling it. Some evidence besides his word will have to be produced to convince me that he wasn't an accessory."

"You might call La Haquenée," said Clara Hope from her place beside Mrs. Granger.

Balai, glad for an excuse to vent his feelings, turned upon her in a fury.

"We might, indeed, if you hadn't helped him to escape arrest."

"Haquenée is out in the corridor," she answered.

"What?"

"In the corridor."

The chief was fairly taken back, but managed to retort:

"Then you've had him in hiding!"

"Oh, no. He didn't need my help for that. But he has been shadowing you all, and tonight he picked up my trail as I was entering the museum. We had a talk, and I advised him to keep in touch."

"You admit, at least, that you signaled him a warning that day on the balcony?"

"Of course I admit it, chief. I knew you were preparing to arrest him for the murder of Leontine—and he was innocent."

"How did you know he was innocent?"

"Let me answer for her," cut in McClue. "She knew it because he was seen while the real murderer is known to have been locked in Leontine's room."

"He wasn't locked in," fumed the chief. "I showed you how the window bolts were worn, and even the hole he made in the putty as he drew the window to behind him on going out."

"You showed me the hole," the detective agreed, "and I pretended to accept your theory. But I was per-

fectly certain that the hole wasn't there when you and Miss Hope broke into the room. *You*, possibly, might have overlooked such a thing, but it was out of the question for her to have done so. It was clear, too, that she hadn't found it, otherwise she wouldn't have eliminated the apache and helped him to escape. So whoever used an instrument on the putty was a later intruder. Leontine was strangled by The Squid disguised as Peters—and he crawled out behind your back."

It was a hard pill for Balai to swallow, and while he was gulping over it I summoned La Haquenée, who looked for all the world as if he had recently been crying.

"Is that straight, what you told me about La Gadelle?" he demanded, turning at once to Clara.

"Yes," she answered, "and it's something I want to explain more fully to the people here. Silva suffered sometimes from hereditary influences like her brother, and believed herself to be half mad. She knew that Haquenée, and maybe Julien, thought her a criminal. At times she even suspected herself. But her good impulses were stronger than the evil ones, and she wanted to save me from what she believed was a trap. So when I pretended to elope, she took one of my dresses—as on another occasion, Haquenée, I took

one of hers—and followed me, and from Rognerons on succeeded in filling my place.

“She didn’t yet know who Peters was, but she’d been watching him, strangely affected by a vague premonition of the truth. At Avignon it came to her with the first flash of his lantern, and she jumped to her death—as much from horror as through fear. She died in my arms after telling me everything, and I buried her. So nobody has any further need for concealment.”

“Then I might as well confess,” broke in La Haquenée, the tears streaming down his face. “Leontine double-crossed me. You see it was her that took the dagger hilt from La Gadelle’s desk and gave it to me in the first place. L’Estrange, I guess, had planted it there after the ball, and Leontine got hold of it while La Gadelle had fallen asleep looking for it. Naturally Leontine gave it to me. But she stole it again and took to reporting to the *boîte*, waiting her chance to put it where it would do the most harm. I suspected her and tried to find it, but couldn’t.”

“No wonder,” interjected McClue. “Peters must have stolen it from Leontine before sending the chief the anonymous letter telling him where to look for it.”

“I suppose so,” ventured the apache. “But La Gadelle had let me think it was she who had wet the

blade, and I was worried. When Miss Hope gave me the get-away sign I thought the hilt had been found on La Gabelle in spite of me. So I sneaks up under the vines, intending to wait and give Leontine what was coming to her. But if you'll believe me; she was there already—as dead as a *machabée*. Of course I lit out then—drawing the window shut after me with a round-pointed little toad-sticker I happened to be carrying.”

“There's your evidence, Balai,” I couldn't help chuckling. “But before I perform a certain good deed which has now become my duty, there's another detail that ought to be cleared up. On one occasion Miss Hope had an interview with Peters at the very hour when l'Estrange was calling on me. If both of these men were The Squid——”

“It was a prepared alibi,” Clara interrupted. “We only thought that the two visits took place at the same time. My watch and all the clocks in the house had been turned back half an hour.”

“But you compared your watch with one in a *horlogerie* the next day.”

“He had set it right again—during the night.”

“Very well,” said I. “Then I shall no longer put off my good deed.”

In fact it was becoming difficult to endure the glances which Ferrard was casting in Millie Granger's direction. The girl still slept, but the young man's

impatience was burning like a flame in his eyes—as if to ask what right had I, an old man of the law, to interfere with youth and love? In nature's scales, I was painfully aware, I counted for very little in comparison. So I hastened to sign the formal releases of all the prisoners, and announced.

"M'sieu Ferrard, you are free."

I didn't speak above an ordinary tone. But my words, entering the ears which had been deaf to all our preceding mummary, were as effective as a trumpet blast.

"Free!"

Millie jumped to her feet, saw Julien and flung herself into his arms. He should, I suppose, have shown a little reluctance—have manifested at least some appearance of mourning for La Gadelle. But happiness is cruel. The lovers no longer had a thought for a soul but themselves.

I nodded to Balai and the inspectors, and with them left the room, taking pains to see that Ma and Pa Granger, Bec, Forgeron, Haquenée, my clerk and Le Squelette followed in our wake. Yes, and that disturbingly sagacious bird, which, in learning to imitate the cries he had heard in the tower, still carried with him the echoes of one knows not how many undetected crimes. Only McClue and Clara Hope had any right

to remain behind with the dreamers. Even they, it appeared, had no certain title. For, looking back over my shoulder, I was surprised to see him take a step in my direction, only desisting when Clara's hand fell upon his shoulder.

He was, I learned afterwards, unable to understand how she could have left him in suspense all those days following his supposed discovery of her disfigured body. As a matter of fact, she knew nothing about his gruesome error, having failed to foresee that—thinking she had worn the shepherd's plaid really taken by Silva—even *The Ferret* could lose his wits to the extent of making a mistaken identification.

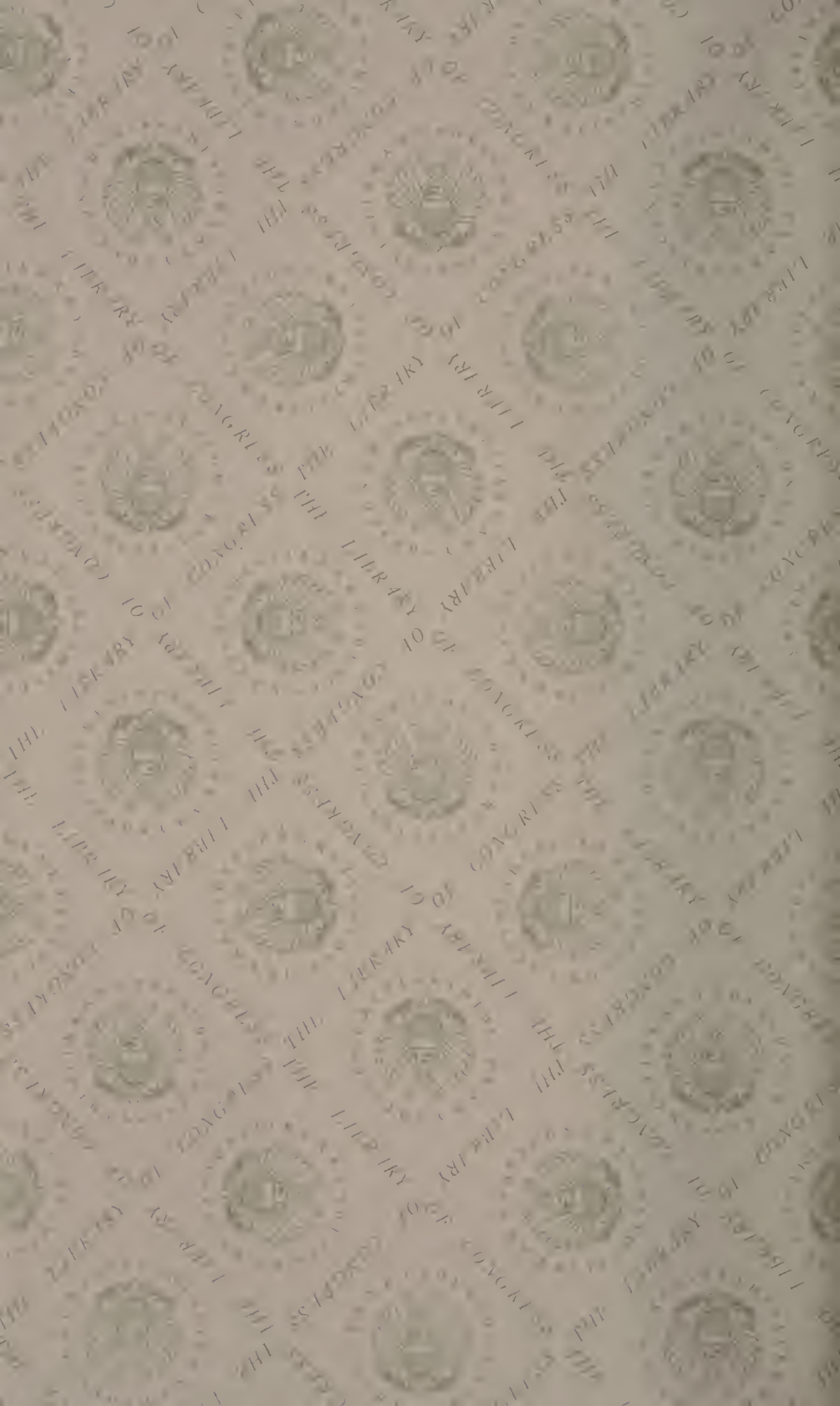
Since then I have received an invitation to *The Ferret's* wedding. He and Clara are to be married at the American Embassy, and Paris will lose one of the few men who truly interest me—that is, unless some new and startling crime comes to keep him with us a little longer. The wall of silence, by the way, which seemed at one time so inexplicable, proved to be nothing more than the doings of a traitorous employee in the McClue Agency in New York, who—in the pay of the enemy—intercepted the missing letters and telegrams. It was simple enough. And so, no doubt, will be the next mystery—when we have found it out.

Just now the newspapers are featuring Clara Hope

as the heroine in this famous affair of The Squid. But it is La Gadelle that I shall remember. How fine she must have been in those final hours when, struggling towards the truth, she battled with her own delusions and gave her life for one whom she knew as only a servant.

THE END

776





LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



00022814692

